



## THE 2022 UKRAINE CRISIS: WHAT IT MEANS FOR SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

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### *Abstrak*

*Konflik antara Rusia dan Ukraina yang dimulai pada Februari 2022 – disebut sebagai krisis Ukraina 2022 – telah memberikan dampak signifikan pada dinamika hubungan Cina-Rusia. Pada saat Rusia menghadapi reaksi keras dari komunitas global, Cina diharapkan bisa mengambil peran peredam, karena hubungan bilateral mereka yang baik selama satu dekade terakhir. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki potensi peningkatan ketegasan respons Cina terhadap invasi Rusia dan implikasi yang dihasilkan terhadap hubungan mereka. Studi ini juga mengkaji konsekuensi dari krisis pada hubungan Cina-Rusia, dengan mempertimbangkan elemen-elemen yang berkontribusi terhadap perubahan atau kelangsungan hubungan tersebut. Dengan merujuk pada sejarah singkat hubungan mereka dan dinamika kekuasaan di antara para aktor yang relevan (pendekatan realis), analisis studi ini mengungkapkan bahwa Cina telah keluar dari posisi awalnya yang netral selama krisis, yang mengindikasikan kapasitasnya untuk memikul tanggung jawab yang lebih besar untuk menjadi salah satu kekuatan utama dunia. Namun demikian, seiring dengan berjalannya waktu, hubungan kedua negara mungkin akan lebih menguntungkan bagi Cina, terutama karena meningkatnya ketergantungan ekonomi Rusia dan potensi Cina untuk meningkatkan posisi globalnya.*

**Kata Kunci:** Amerika Serikat; Cina; krisis Ukraina 2022; Rusia

### **Abstract**

The onset of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in February 2022, commonly referred to as the 2022 Ukraine crisis, has had a notable impact on the dynamics of Sino-Russian relations. In light of Russia encountering a severe reaction from the global community, it is anticipated that China will assume a mitigating role, owing to their amicable bilateral ties throughout the preceding decade. This study investigates the potential for increased assertiveness in China's response to the invasion and the resulting implications for their ties. It examines the ramifications of the crisis on Sino-Russian relations, considering the elements that contribute to either the change or continuity of these interactions. It does so by referencing a short historical account of the relations and power dynamics among the relevant actors, employing a realist perspective. The analysis of this study reveals that China has departed from its initially neutral position during the crisis, indicating its capacity to assume the responsibilities associated with becoming a major global power. Nevertheless, their bilateral relations may be advantageous to China with time, primarily due to Russia's increasing economic reliance and China's potential for enhancing its global standing.

**Keywords:** China; Russia; the 2022 Ukraine crisis; the United States

## Introduction

Since the beginning of 2022, the world has been wary of a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine. In early February 2022, for example, some media outlets published a White House statement that an attack was imminent and the world should be ready for it. The United States and its allies in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) were alarmed, as was Ukraine, which had prepared itself for the worst. The invasion finally happened when Russia attacked eastern Ukraine on 24 February 2022, making the so-called “Ukraine Crisis” start.

Three days before, on 21 February 2022, Russia recognized two separatist regions in Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk, as “independent states,” referring to them as “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic,” respectively (Brand Ukraine NGO, 2022). Following this, on 24 February, Russia launched a full-scale “special military operation” against Ukraine. Russian forces invaded Ukraine from all geographical sides, entering through Belarus in the north, Crimea in the south, and its land from the east. As of 24 August 2022, more than 11.1 million people have fled from Ukraine to Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Moldova, Belarus, and Russia (Psaropoulos, 2022). It is estimated that 200,000 Russian and Ukrainian soldiers were either killed or wounded, and approximately more than 40,000 Ukrainian civilians were killed per 10 November 2022 (Lock, 2022).

The invasion is not the first time. Ukraine, which was once part of the Soviet Union and had a lot of nuclear weapons left by the superpower, has had bad relations with Russia since the latter annexed Crimea, a Ukrainian territory, in 2014. Following the annexation, a controversial referendum was held on 16 March 2014, aimed to ascertain the preference of the Crimean population for either the annexation or the maintenance of Crimea’s status as part of Ukraine, but with more autonomy. Despite a substantial level of participation, the prevailing choice among the electorate was in favor of Russia, as approximately 96.7% of the respondents expressed their support for this option (Hall, 2023). Nevertheless, there has been much controversy over the referendum’s legitimacy, as other countries have rejected Russia’s annexation and affirmed Ukraine’s territorial integrity. The United Nations General Assembly then rendered a declaration stating the invalidity of the referendum. The world strongly condemned the annexation. The U.S. and the European Union (E.U.) immediately

imposed economic sanctions on Russia and its top officials to force the country to stop its annexation. Russia retaliated by threatening to cut off gas supplies to Western Europe. Russia still occupies Crimea until now, and the dark shadow of 2014 may be repeated in the events of the 2022 invasion (EEAS, 2022).

Like in 2014, in response to the invasion, sanction after sanction or even a “full-scale sanction” has been imposed by mainly the E.U., the U.S. and its allies, disabling Russian financial, defense, and, to a certain extent, social sectors. The E.U., the U.S., and its allies launched the first round of sanctions targeting high-profile individuals and major Russian banks, freezing the assets of Kremlin’s top people and excluding the banks from the SWIFT system (European Council, 2022; Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office, 2022). The sanctions were imposed to sideline the Russian “war chest” and financially hurt the Kremlin (Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office, 2022). Major multinational corporations (MNCs) like Shell, British Petroleum, and Norway’s sovereign wealth fund, pulled out all their joint ventures with Russia (Psaropoulos, 2022).

As tensions in Europe increased, the E.U., through the Versailles Declaration on 10-11 March 2022, called upon its members to strengthen their defense spending. NATO countries increased security by placing troops, particularly in Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary (European Council, 2022; Macias, 2022). Weeks later, Russia shifted its focus to the east as Ukrainian forces pushed back in the north and south. On 29 March 2022, Russian and Ukrainian negotiators met in person for the first time in Istanbul (Inskeep & Kenyon, 2022), marking a substantial step on the diplomatic front. Nevertheless, as demonstrated later, no agreements or ceasefire had come to satisfy both parties until the time of writing.

Back then, China was one of the many actors who paid attention to the annexation of Crimea. President Xi Jinping, who has led China since 2013, is widely known to be on good terms with Russian leader Vladimir Putin (Korolev, 2016). They also frequently give harsh statements to the U.S. and its allies. At the United Nations (U.N.) Security Council meetings, for example, they jointly often veto resolution proposals from the U.S. or its allies, believing the proposals are a way for the West to impose their will and maintain their hegemony. Nevertheless, China did not provide a clear statement on the Crimea issue. Many were expecting China’s clear stance on the subject, given it

is one permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, has a self-claimed status of 'responsible great power,' and is a close friend of Russia. Xi emphasized that the world should not interfere in a country's domestic affairs. In this case, China showed its "neutrality" toward annexation (Ding, 2014; Muraviev, 2015; Saalman, 2016), a position that China holds regarding the 2022 invasion.

By asserting that Russia is a sovereign country trying to fulfill its interests, China did not condemn the aggression denounced by the world community (Cheng, 2022; Li, 2022). Soon after the invasion, China abstained from voting in the U.N. Security Council for a resolution condemning the attack and calling Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine immediately. Nevertheless, it did not say Russia's actions were fully justified. China's decision to abstain from the U.N. resolution reflects its position of neutrality on the crisis and its broader foreign policy objectives of maintaining stability while balancing its economic interests in the region. As a friend of Russia, China refrains from putting hard pressure on the country. Still, it does not want to be isolated from the international community for acting as if it supported an invasion (Johnson & Huang, 2022). This Chinese attitude is interesting to investigate further.

As a global power, China has strategic interests in various regions, including Russia and Ukraine, with which it has major economic cooperation. China also has a long-standing policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, which means that it generally opposes external interference in the affairs of other nations. Despite this, it can be said that the world may expect China to take a firmer stance rather than be neutral. A strong stance by China could signal its commitment to maintaining stability in the region and protecting its economic interests while maintaining its principle of non-interference. China's firm position will not only greatly determine the pattern of its relations with Russia (Düben, 2015; Wishnick, 2017), but also how the world views China more fairly, especially regarding the role that it can play in resolving the international security crisis.

In recent years, the Ukraine crisis has tested the strength of Sino-Russian relations, putting them to the ultimate test. China's not taking a clear stance on Russia's actions in Ukraine may have exposed potential conflicts of interest between the two countries, including China's reliance on Russia for energy and natural resources. This crisis has highlighted the importance of their relations and the potential risks of a

breakdown in ties. If the situation escalates, it could significantly strain the relationship between the two nations, which could have far-reaching implications for the international system, especially on food and energy security as well as trade and investment, which could further destabilize global markets (Butler, 2022; OECD, 2022; Thomson, 2022). By closely examining the crisis, we can better understand how Sino-Russian relations will fare in the future. The Ukraine crisis has implications for their ties, and both countries must be prepared to adapt to changing circumstances in terms of, among others, the global economy, geopolitical alliances, security, energy, and supply chains (Coles, 2023).

This study seeks to answer whether China will be more assertive in its response to the invasion and what impact this Chinese attitude will have on its relations with Russia (Blanchette & Lin, 2022; Stokes, 2022). These questions are essential for at least three reasons. Firstly, China's response to the Ukraine crisis could have significant geopolitical implications, given that China is one of the world's major powers. The reaction can help us understand how the crisis might unfold and its impact on global politics. Secondly, the response will impact China-Russia relations significantly. A shift in China's position on the Ukraine crisis could strain the relationship between the two countries, which could have significant consequences for them and the world. Finally, the response sheds light on China's broader foreign policy objectives and how it seeks to balance its interests in different regions.

This research is a qualitative endeavor, with a primary method of desk study, to investigate the nature of Sino-Russia relations after the 2022 Ukraine crisis. Data was collected from various sources and then analyzed to obtain findings in response to the research objectives. In doing so, this study is divided into five parts. After this introduction, there is a brief, general picture of Sino-Russia ties over the years – this is important to look at the basics of the relations. Following that, China's response to the Ukraine crisis is presented. The study then analyzes the implications of the invasion, looking at factors contributing to the change or continuation of Sino-Russian relations after the crisis. The study ends with a conclusion.



## *Relations between China and Russia and the Ukraine crisis*

### *Sino-Russia Relations in Brief*

China and Russia have had a complex and often contentious relationship throughout history. They have been two of the world's most significant powers for centuries, and their relations largely shaped international politics. In the 19th century, they clashed over control of Central Asia, a conflict that foreshadowed the tense relationship that would follow. In the early 20th century, Russia and China were allies during the Russian Revolution and the early years of the Soviet Union. Still, their relationship soon deteriorated as the Soviet Union began to see China as a rival for influence in Asia. During the Cold War, the two sides were ideological rivals. Their relationship was highly problematic as the two countries engaged in a series of border clashes, the most serious being the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict. This conflict and other factors, such as ideological differences, led to a complete breakdown in relations between the two countries, with each side viewing the other as a threat. The two states cooperated on a few limited issues. Yet, they attempted to undermine each other for the most part, including Russia's insecurity, the lack of cultural consonance, and their economic and military asymmetry (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2021).

Relations began to improve in the 1980s as both countries sought to strengthen their international standing and reduce tensions. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 fundamentally changed Sino-Russian relations, giving rise to the possibility of more positive relations. After the Soviet collapse, Russia was in a weak position, significantly more so than China. This state of affairs allowed Beijing to take control of the relationship, laying the foundations for an asymmetrical partnership between the two states.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Beijing and Moscow prioritized economic ties over political cooperation while limiting their cooperation on sensitive issues, such as arms control. China and Russia viewed each other as essential partners but recognized the potential for significant problems in their relationship. On the one hand, Russia, which emerged to replace the Soviet Union as one of the major world powers, has had economic development as one of its top national priorities. To ensure its economic growth, one crucial policy Russia manages is establishing favorable foreign relations, particularly with the U.S. and China. Russia views China as a partner that can help it

develop its economy and return to its former Soviet glory. On the other hand, Chinese leaders also see that relations with Russia are significant in China's intention to become a great power and build its economy peacefully. In light of this, China and Russia signed the Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation on 16 July 2001. The treaty demonstrates their mutual interests in maintaining internal and regional stability and advancing development (China Report, 2001).

The Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation implicitly also manifests the common interests of China and Russia to prevent the expansion of American hegemonic power in Asia. This prevention is understandable because they share a similar history of U.S. resentment towards them, harming their national interests. One of their bold attempts to challenge American hegemony is establishing and being heavily involved in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) since June 2001. This regional organization also comprised Central Asian countries as their shared sphere of influence. The two countries were also involved in the Six-Party Negotiations, which are intended to help resolve North Korea's nuclear weapon development, along with the U.S., South Korea, and Japan.

Both countries are major players in the global economy and have significant trade and investment with each other. For example, Russia is a major energy supplier to China, while China is a key market for Russian goods and services. China is Russia's most important trading partner after the European Union, reaching a record of \$147 billion in 2021. At the same time, however, Russia is China's 14<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner (Maizland, 2022) – creating an imbalance in their economic relations. Notwithstanding this disparity, economic cooperation and geopolitical considerations undeniably constitute a crucial concern in Sino-Russian relations. Politics and economy are two primary considerations for China and Russia in their collaboration with Brazil, India, and South Africa within the BRICS (an acronym of the five countries' names) framework. These five nations' collective economies are anticipated to become a prominent global force within the coming decade. The BRICS nations have demonstrated heightened diplomatic engagements, lobbied for enhanced representation in global economic and security forums, and established new financial institutions, such as the New Development Bank, mainly to facilitate infrastructure developments (Ayres, 2017). These actions have positioned BRICS as a significant contender to the G7, a

coalition of global economic giants, regarding geopolitical and geo-economic influence. China and Russia leverage the BRICS as a strategic opportunity to position themselves as viable alternatives to the U.S. and its allies. Following the result of the recent BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, it was determined that six additional nations would be granted membership into BRICS. Notably, China and Russia significantly influenced this membership decision-making process. The bilateral relations between China and Russia have substantially influenced the BRICS, as the two nations have collaborated to enhance the bloc's scope and counterbalance Western hegemony (Gramer & Lu, 2023; Imray, 2023; Lederman, 2023).

Since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Sino-Russian relations have improved, with the two countries increasing economic ties and conducting joint military exercises. However, there were still areas of disagreement, such as Russia's support for separatist movements in Ukraine and Georgia, which strained relations with China. Despite this, their relations have remained strong, continuing to cooperate on issues such as trade and security.

The current China-Russia bilateral relations are the best of all time, as seen by the "bromance" of Xi and Putin (Webster, 2022). The relationship between the two leaders is generally seen as solid and friendly, with both men expressing mutual admiration and support for one another. One key factor that has strengthened the relationship between Xi and Putin is their shared vision for their countries' future. Both leaders have emphasized the importance of national sovereignty and self-reliance and have sought to reduce their countries' dependence on the West. This vision has led to closer cooperation between China and Russia on various issues, including economic development, security, and international relations. Since the beginning of his reign, Xi has given signs that he will establish good cooperation with Russia. However, Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014 greatly affected the two countries. China did not support Russia's annexation of Crimea because such support might be seen as interfering with Russia's domestic affairs. China's overall approach to international relations is guided by its commitment to non-interference principles, respect for sovereignty, and peaceful coexistence. These principles are essential to maintaining regional stability and global peace (Xi Jinping, 2014). As expected, China abstained from the U.N. Security Council session on Crimea's status.



Some would argue that the Crimea annexation was an unintended consequence of how the U.S. and its allies treated other great powers – within this context, Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014). Since then, relations between the West and Russia have deteriorated, while Sino-Russia relations are progressing. Nevertheless, when the current invasion happens, the West expects China to have a firm position over Russia (Kuhrt & Kaczmarek, 2022). The situation is difficult for China due to its close relations with Russia. There is an argument that China can use the invasion to justify attacking Taiwan if the cross-strait situation worsens (Kynge, 2022; Lunting, 2022; Osnos, 2022).

To a great extent, China and Russia can be considered as “allies” (Ying, 2016) as they share similar perspectives on global issues due to the prevalence of a common foe, the United States. It is also important to determine whether the strategic geopolitical interest in rejecting American hegemonism will continue to be the central theme of their relations. The findings of this study are expected to provide a comprehensive picture to answer these questions (see Lukin, 2021).

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is likely the toughest test for the continuity of relations between the two countries. The invasion is the most challenging circumstance that Russia and China have encountered, and its outcome could have significant implications for their strategic partnership. This event has prompted international condemnation and sanctions and revealed potential conflicts of interest between the two nations. China has been cautious not to take a clear position on the conflict, but it has expressed concern about the situation and called for a peaceful resolution. If the two countries cannot overcome the challenges posed by the crisis, their relationship could deteriorate. Alternatively, the partnership could be strengthened if the two nations can work together to resolve the crisis and mitigate its effects on their relationship. China’s more assertive attitude towards the invasion and Russia’s response to this attitude will significantly determine Europe’s international politics and security pattern (Borrell, 2022). It will also give a new dimension to the discussion of great power competition and the dynamics of the triangular relationship between the U.S., Russia, and China, which will determine what direction the world will go (see Davis & Slobodchikoff, 2022; Kausikan, 2023; Nagy, 2022).

### *China's Response to Russia Attacking Ukraine*

Before discussing China's response to the 2022 Ukraine attack, it is necessary to revisit the events of 2014. China's response to the annexation by Russia that year has been considered dodging and "trying to not pivot to any side" (Dyer, 2014). In the Security Council, China abstained from a resolution that tried to condemn Crimea's referendum, with Russia vetoing. When abstaining, the then Permanent Representative of China to the U.N., Ambassador Liu Jieyi stated that "China has always respected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states ... At the same time we have noticed foreign interference is also an important reason leading to violent clashes on the streets of Ukraine" (Sengupta, 2014). In the U.N. General Assembly, China also abstained from the UNGA Resolution 68/262 on the Territorial Integrity of Ukraine (U.N. General Assembly, 2014). This response by China is considerably similar to when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2022 (Kuhrt & Kaczmarek, 2022).

Since 2014, Beijing has pursued a cautious approach to the relations between Russia and Ukraine. At the start of the conflict, Beijing adopted a careful approach to avoid a strong position, i.e., criticizing Russia over the annexation. This approach allowed China to maintain good relations with Russia, Ukraine, and the West, allowing Beijing to play a more significant role in the ongoing crisis, privately pressuring both sides to reach a peaceful solution. As the problem dragged on, Beijing's position became more assertive, urging both sides to negotiate a settlement. However, Russia seemed unconvinced by China's efforts as it created another crisis eight years later in Ukraine.

As sanctions rolled out from the West, China took a relatively neutral stance in responding to the invasion. China's response was similar to when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, referring back to international order without directly pointing fingers at the West nor explicitly condemning Russia. A few days after Russian forces entered Ukraine, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed in an interview, "[T]he situation in Ukraine has become what it is today for a variety of complex reasons. What is needed to solve complex issues (situation in Ukraine) is a cool head and a rational mind, not adding fuel to the fire which only intensifies the situation" (Silk Road Briefing, 2022). He then called upon the UN Charter to be upheld and that China respects the "sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries" (Silk Road Briefing, 2022).

During the same interview, Wang Yi also clarified China's priorities: facilitating dialogue for peace and preventing a massive humanitarian crisis. On the status quo of China-Russia relations, he was confident that despite the "precarious and challenging" international situation, both "China and Russia will maintain strategic focus and steadily advance our comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era" (Silk Road Briefing, 2022). The last statement strengthens the result of Xi and Putin meeting weeks before. On 4 February 2022, Putin and Xi Jinping met in Beijing during the Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony. They agreed on a joint statement and reaffirmation of the "no limits" cooperation (Denisov, 2022).

China is seen to be trying to 'satisfy' both Russia and the U.S. China frequently pointed fingers at the U.S. for provoking, "adding fuel to the fire," and meddling in one country's "domestic" issues (Denisov, 2022), proving China's rhetorical support to Russia. An unnamed Chinese official stated that the U.S., as "the initiator of the crisis and a contracting party," must reflect on its role and shoulder responsibilities to resolve the Ukraine crisis and regain the international community's trust (Yunbi, 2022). China has also never narrated the situation in Ukraine as "the Russian invasion," pivoting its "trustful" relations with Russia as an asset in efforts to a peaceful resolution (Denisov, 2022). This act of China amplifies its interest in maintaining good relations with Russia. In the long run, it might be vital for China's leverage in its competition with the U.S.

On the other side, China did not recognize Donetsk People's Republic, Luhansk People's Republic, nor did it recognize Crimea as a part of Russia back in 2014, and South Ossetia and Abkhazia of Georgia as independent states back in 2008 (Denisov, 2022). Following Putin's threat to utilize nuclear weapons in Ukraine, Xi met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and agreed that the nuclear threats were "irresponsible and extremely dangerous" (Chazan et al., 2022). The same understanding was shared between Xi and U.S. President Joe Biden during a sideline meeting of the G20 leaders summit in November 2022, stating that "nuclear weapons cannot be used and nuclear wars cannot be fought" (Reuters, 2022). This position shows how Beijing is starting to feel uncomfortable about the Kremlin's rhetoric and visions. China's concerns about Russia's nuclear posture are growing, including the development of new nuclear weapons and a more assertive stance on the issues (Scobell et al., 2022). China is also concerned about Russia's growing military presence, potentially threatening its security

interests (China Power, 2022; Korolev, 2019). Given this development, China is keen to prevent any escalation of regional tensions, including the possible use of nuclear weapons in the war between Russia and Ukraine (Ip, 2023).

Some political analysts believe Xi Jinping was caught off-guard or blindsided by Putin when meeting for a joint statement before the Olympics. This argument can be seen from the rather late response of China to secure its citizens in Ukraine. It took three days for China to announce the mechanisms to protect the Chinese in Ukraine (Aluf, 2022). However, some also speculate that Xi knew Putin's plan and requested that the invasion be postponed until the Beijing Winter Olympics commenced (Rogin, 2022). A more radical theory also surfaced, suggesting that China has been reapproaching its relationship with Russia to corner the U.S., the same way China reapproached the U.S. back in the Cold War to corner the Soviet Union. It is suggested that the situation is just a tiny piece of the Sino-Russian's grand strategy in forming "Cold War 2.0" (Roach, 2022).

Shifting focus to China's stance on the international arena, Chinese diplomats have again led the world into a *déjà vu* of 2008 and 2014. China abstained in at least two Security Council resolutions that tried to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine (one in February 2022 and the other in October 2022), UNGA Resolution ES-11/1 on Aggression against Ukraine, and voted against UNGA Resolution on Russian reparations for Ukraine (United Nations, 2022). The decisions of China upon its abstention and rejection can be interpreted in two different ways. First, China is constantly cozying up to Russia, neglecting the core principles of its foreign policy, which are "upholding international law" and "respects territorial integrity of sovereign states" (United Nations, 2022). Second, China is reluctant to compromise its favorable diplomatic ties with Russia. Abstaining might be interpreted as promoting improved relations while safeguarding individual interests. It can be observed later that China and Russia have increased the frequency of their high-level encounters "in a departure from recent efforts by Beijing to play down its alignment with Moscow" (Ramzi & Cheng, 2023).

If we look domestically at China being seemingly neutral about the Ukraine crisis, before the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on 16-20 October 2022, China preferred a dodging and focus-shifting strategy in responding to

the crisis. Only after Xi successfully secured a third term as the Party's general secretary did China seem uncomfortable with Putin's ambition. This slight change of position is understandable, considering consistency in policies is depicted as a strength in China. The last thing Xi wanted before securing a third term was any irregularities in his decisions. Nevertheless, the narrative that consistency equals power might change as the Chinese protest against Xi's zero-Covid policy, which is why Xi should consider adaptability, especially in international approaches.

As of December 2022, the status quo of the situation in Ukraine remained uncertain. The EU, the U.S. and its allies had been imposing more sanctions, with not-so-promising progress in the diplomatic front, bilaterally between Russia and Ukraine and multilaterally in the U.N. Aside from domestic issues with Covid and economic growth, China conducts its business as usual. The China-Russia natural gas pipeline just finished its construction, which is said to be the "landmark energy cooperation project" between the two countries (Global Times, 2022). China may deflect the highly probable narrative, which has yet to be spread by the West (mainly the U.S.), that China is directly funding Russia's invasion of Ukraine by purchasing their gas.

### **Implications of the 2022 Ukraina to Sino-Russia relations**

The current relationship between China and Russia is complex, with both countries often seen as strategic partners and competitors. The two countries have a solid political and economic relationship, with both nations regularly engaging in joint military exercises and economic cooperation. However, there are also some tensions between the two countries, particularly territorial disputes and competing regional interests. It is important to remember that the relations between countries can be dynamic and change over time, so staying informed about the latest developments is always best.

The Ukraine crisis has significantly affected the relations between China and Russia. Previously, in the early stages of the 2014 annexation, both countries were closely aligned, with Russia supporting separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine and China abstaining from voting on a U.N. resolution condemning Russia's actions. However, as the crisis has continued, there have been some signs of tension between China and Russia, with China reportedly growing concerned about Russia's increasing aggression

and militarization. The same thing happened later during the crisis, adding a new layer of complexity to their already-complicated dynamic.

China's foreign policy is complex and can be influenced by many factors. In general, however, China has tended to take a cautious and non-confrontational approach to international conflicts, and it is unlikely that the country would openly criticize Russia over its actions in Ukraine. The strategic relationship and shared interests have made it difficult for China to maintain its distance from Russia, despite the latter's actions that continue to imperil international peace by invading Ukraine. They have also been described as having a "no-limit partnership." Nonetheless, it is evident that this so-called "no-limit partnership" has its restrictions (Kim, 2023). China may use more subtle diplomatic channels to express its concerns and try to influence Russia's behavior. It is also possible that China may continue to abstain from voting on United Nations resolutions related to the crisis, as it did in the early stages of the conflict.

As its foreign policy principles suggest, China does not want to be seen as interfering too much in another country's affairs, in this case, Russia. However, it is also possible that this attitude is because China does not want to be dragged into a conflict between Russia and the West (Feigenbaum, 2022), with detrimental consequences for China itself – for example, the imposition of sanctions similar to those given to Russia. The implication is that China wants to balance itself between options of not condemning but remaining critical of Russia on the one hand and not sacrificing its relationship with the West, especially with the United States. China's strategic calculations suggest that supporting Russia will jeopardize the country's relations with the EU and the U.S. (Blanchette & Lin, 2022). This position may provide temporary benefits for China. Still, China must support rules-based international order in the long run. China is considered one of the actors who should be more assertive (towards Russia) in resolving the crisis in Ukraine.

The Ukraine crisis also highlights another dimension. China expects Russia to back itself on several territorial issues, particularly Taiwan. The crisis has highlighted the possibility of China attacking Taiwan – a widely-debated 'scenario' that was even argued by U.S. President Joe Biden on his first trip to Asia in May 2022 (Lendon & Watson, 2022). However, China must wait until the crisis is over before launching such an attack (Mastro, 2022) due to the overwhelming costs the attack will bear (Lendon &



Watson, 2022). China believes that Russia will be a significant security partner and supplier of its vital needs, especially energy, in the event of a conflict with the U.S. (Blanchette & Lin, 2022). China, which is said to be the “world’s foremost geopolitical realist” (Campbell, 2022), seems to be more focused on fulfilling its national interests than the common interests of the international community, namely ending the Russo-Ukrainian war. It is even argued that “[i]n the long run, China is more interested in utilizing the Ukrainian war to undermine American leadership and sow discord in the transatlantic relationship.” (Kuo, 2022). Challenging America’s hegemony in Europe and restoring Russia’s greatness and control in the region are the main goals of Russian foreign policy. This policy is equivalent to China’s policy in Asia as a part of Xi’s worldview.

Certain observers understand that China is working to separate itself from Russia’s actions and their consequences by, for example, abstaining from the U.N. resolutions. Some see this abstention as a sign of a ‘true friendship’ between the two nations. However, James Palmer views this action as “may be a sign of genuine Chinese displeasure at Russia” (Palmer, 2022). What is certain is that China’s abstention had been expected. While stressing that it respects international law, China has consistently argued that it is inappropriate for a country to interfere in the actions of another country. This argument reflects the principle of non-interference that has long been a part of China’s foreign policy.

One of the critical factors that has strengthened the relations between China and Russia is Xi Jinping’s and Vladimir Putin’s rapport. The two leaders have met numerous times and held informal discussions and meetings. As suggested by Gabuev, “[t]he close personal relationship between Putin and Xi strengthens the political component of their partnership. The desire of Putin and Xi to restore their nations’ greatness and challenge American global dominance is another component of the China-Russia entente’s secret sauce” (Gabuev, 2021). Both leaders have emphasized the importance of national sovereignty and self-reliance, and have sought to reduce their countries’ dependence on the West. This situation has led to closer cooperation between China and Russia on various issues, including economic development, security, and international relations. The long-standing personal relationship between the two leaders was strengthened when Xi called Putin to wish him a happy birthday and then traveled

to Moscow to visit him on 20-22 March 2023. During the visit, Xi reaffirmed that China will continue to support Russia's "sovereignty and security" regardless of changes in the international political landscape. This event indicates that, as of the time of writing, global turmoil has not altered the relationship between China and Russia (Adlakha, 2022). As long as these two leaders are in charge, it is likely that the nature of relations between China and Russia remains. China and Russia may continue their strategic, comprehensive relations – provided the current leadership stays in power.

While Xi's and Putin's relations and shared interests and goals may drive favorable situations for future relations between China and Russia, there are also some restrictions. Both countries will unlikely form a military alliance because each wants to maintain strategic autonomy. They also have different interests when it comes to global security. In this strategic context, it can be argued that there is a certain level of distrust between the two countries, so creating a military alliance against the West in Europe seems almost impossible. The different strategic interests can potentially break Sino-Russia solid relations. While both countries have strengthened their political, economic, and military connections, the imbalance in favor of China is growing. Russia's economic dependence on China grows, effectively making Russia need China rather than vice versa. China's economy is ten times larger than that of Russia. In 2021, Russian exports to China accounted for 4.4% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), which could likely surpass 5% in 2023. China's growing economic and technological influence in Russia will continue to restrict Moscow's maneuverability (Webster, 2023). In light of this, more limitations can be seen when the two countries compete for more influence in Central Asia and the Arctic. In both regions, Russia faces China, which is increasingly pursuing its national interests, and the United States, which does not want to lose its global dominance (Gabuev, 2021). How China and Russia manage their strategic security interests, economy, trade, and the competition for influence in Central Asia and the Arctic will significantly determine their relations amidst concerns over the Ukraine crisis.

The Ukraine Crisis has forced both sides to make crucial decisions about the future of their relations, leading to various outcomes. One potential result is that the Ukraine crisis will strengthen Sino-Russian relations, allowing the two states to draw closer together in the face of Western pressure. China and Russia share a common

desire to challenge Western dominance and restructure the international order. The Ukraine conflict has affected the pursuit of these common interests, with Russia receiving widespread condemnation and sanctions and China initially perceived as not doing enough to stop the fighting. Recent events have later demonstrated that China has attempted to be more assertive and not just neutral, especially with its “peace proposal.” Prior to Xi’s March 2023 visit to Moscow, China presented a “peace proposal” – formally referred to as “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2023) – to promote an end to the conflict in Ukraine. This plan could be viewed as a response to China’s neutral stance thus far and evidence that China has become more aggressive in resolving the crisis. The peace plan is predicated on China’s dilemma between not wanting to sacrifice its strategic relationship with Russia and losing the opportunity for economic prosperity and technological advancement with Western assistance. It is argued, however, that the peace plan may not be of much practical use; rather, it is intended to bolster China’s international reputation while undermining the West’s credibility to end the conflict (Gabuev, 2023). Nevertheless, China is concerned that Russia will disregard Chinese advice and insist on continuing the conflict. Regional stability will be compromised if this occurs, and China’s interests will be imperiled (Maull, 2022).

Another possible outcome is the opposite that the Ukraine crisis will lead to the end of Sino-Russian relations, resulting in increased tensions and competition between the two states. For Sino-Russian relations to strengthen, the Ukraine crisis must result in both sides committing to a closer partnership. This scenario would require significant concessions, especially on sensitive issues like arms control. If the crisis leads to the breaking of Sino-Russian relations, the two states would likely compete against one another, particularly in Central Asia and other borderlands.

China and Russia will continue to have asymmetrical relations in this uncertain global environment. China remains a significant market for Russian energy and arms exports, but Western sanctions will increase Russia’s economic reliance on China. Russia has recently voiced support for China’s efforts to make the Renminbi a more regionally and internationally acknowledged currency. This support was demonstrated during Xi’s visit to Moscow, when a joint agreement was signed between the two

countries, particularly in finance and security (Maigner, 2023). China could utilize this circumstance to strengthen its position in the global political, economic, and security arenas (Gabuev, 2022b).

Up to the time this study was written, there has been no clear end to the Ukraine crisis. However, one sure thing is that this crisis has become one of the crucial factors for future relations between China and Russia. The Ukraine crisis has had positive and negative implications for Sino-Russian relations. On the one hand, the crisis has led to closer cooperation and coordination between China and Russia, as both countries have opposed Western intervention in the conflict. It has strengthened the strategic partnership between the two countries and helped solidify their position as key global players. With the latest development – Xi’s visit to Moscow, China’s “peace proposal,” and the phone conversation between Xi and President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky on 26 April 2023 – China has positioned itself as somewhat a peacemaker while acquiring leverage over Russia. These events can be seen as another assertive action of China in responding to the war. On the other hand, the crisis has also strained Sino-Russian relations in some respects. For example, China has hesitated to fully support Russia’s actions in Ukraine, as it is concerned about its potential negative impact on its relations with the West. A defeated Russia and demised Putin are not in China’s best interest, as the Kremlin is Beijing’s most significant ally in its opposition to the US-led international order (Fix & Kimmage, 2023; Gabuev, 2022a). Additionally, the crisis has highlighted tensions and underlying differences between China and Russia, such as their differing approaches to regional security and relative economic and military power levels. The future of Sino-Russian relations is complex and will be significantly affected by the outcome of the Ukraine crisis and its consequences.

## **Conclusion**

The Ukraine crisis has been the ultimate test of the strength of Sino-Russian relations so far. This crisis has highlighted the importance of their relations in the international system. The crisis has forced both sides to make crucial decisions about their relations’ future, possibly leading to various outcomes. For Sino-Russian relations to strengthen, the Ukraine crisis must result in both sides committing to a closer partnership.

Several factors suggest that the relationship between China and Russia will continue to be solid and cooperative, despite what is happening now in Ukraine. One of

the critical reasons for this is China and Russia's shared interests and goals that were already there before the crisis. Both countries are committed to maintaining national sovereignty and pursuing independent foreign policies. They also have a strong interest in counteracting the influence of the United States and other Western powers. These shared interests have led to closer cooperation on various issues. Moreover, the personal ties between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin have significantly strengthened Sino-Russian relations. Their relations in the long term will benefit China more, as Russia's economic dependence on China will increase.

What Russia has done over Ukraine cannot be justified by any means. Yet, for the above reasons, it may be too far to expect China to condemn Russia. Nevertheless, recent developments on the crisis have seen China become a 'peace broker,' demonstrating that China has shifted from a neutral stance at the beginning of the crisis to a more assertive one. Despite this, the more the West pushes Russia (and China), the more complex the situation in Ukraine is to resolve. Russia and China may continue to see the U.S. and its allies challenge their shared interests and goals.

The Ukraine crisis will not likely change the nature of Sino-Russian relations; they will continue to be assertive and accommodating. While there may be occasional tensions and differences, the shared interests and goals of China and Russia will likely continue to drive closer cooperation between the two countries in the future.

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