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“TAIWAN FOR SURE IS NOT UKRAINE” – THE PRC’S COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP WITH THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the multifaceted nature of the People’s Republic of China’s position regarding the Russo-Ukrainian War. It provides a comprehensive overview of China’s strategic partnership with Russia, examines the evolution of Sino-Ukrainian relations prior to the conflict, and analyzes the shifting narrative from Beijing concerning the war. The analysis considers China’s geopolitical balancing act, ideological positions, and economic interests, highlighting why China maintains a neutral stance while pursuing its long-term global ambitions. The paper concludes by assessing China’s potential role in mediating a peace deal and the implications for Europe and international diplomacy.*

KEYWORDS: *China, Russia, Ukraine, strategic partnership, neutrality, diplomacy, geopolitical strategy*

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INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

“Taiwan for sure is not Ukraine” – said Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying during a press conference on February 23, 2022.¹ This single line perfectly illustrates the delicate relationship of China with the Russo-Ukrainian War. Like any other geopolitical actor, the “Middle Kingdom”² cannot stop itself from seeing parallels between recent happenings in the world and current or historical Chinese events.³ As always, the Chinese position in such an important situation is very much calculated and thought through. So why does the PRC seem so indifferent about the war between its closest strategic partner and one of Europe’s biggest countries? Why does China not distance itself from Russia, or why does China not give Russia its full support? How could China influence the outcome of the war, and how would that affect Europe?

The purpose of this analysis is to try and answer those questions. The study will give a brief overview of the Russia–China strategic partnership, then explore the Sino-Ukrainian

¹ Hua Chunying Press Conference 2022.

² China in Mandarin Chinese is Zhōngguó (中国), meaning “middle country” or “middle kingdom,” which perfectly captures the Chinese mindset of China being the main source of civilization, surrounded by barbarians.

³ Kopper – Peragovics 2019.

relationship before the war, and finally, it will dissect China's shifting narrative on the Russo-Ukrainian War, its role in a potential Ukrainian peace deal, and draw some conclusions.

In the selection of the topic, the author combined his interest in Chinese foreign affairs and the geopolitical landscape of Europe and formed them into a coherent whole. The relevance of China's relationship with the war cannot be overstated, since the PRC is one of the EU's largest trading partners, and its influence in Europe might have a significant impact in the near future – not just on the EU, but on Euro-Atlantic relations in general. That is why this topic is also of great importance to Hungary, as it is deeply integrated into both NATO and the EU. Understanding the interests of one of the most significant actors in the region in the largest European war since World War II is essential to the country for better diplomatic maneuvering and strategic planning.

THE CHINA–RUSSIA COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

When people look at Sino-Russian relations, they assume that the PRC and the Russian Federation are *de facto* allies⁴ and have made a pact to overthrow the US-led world order and undermine the West. One can also find sources claiming that the Russians and the Chinese people hate each other, and their cooperation is very fragile⁵ and not sustainable in the long term. During the research, the author concluded that the reality is somewhere in the middle. While Russia and China are far from a traditional alliance, their “comprehensive strategic partnership for a new era” is not something to be underestimated.⁶

China and Russia laid the foundations for their future relationship in 1994 with the creation of the China–Russia “Constructive Partnership”. Then it evolved throughout the years: in 1996, with the “Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the 21st Century”, in 2001, with the “Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship, and Cooperation”, in 2010, with the establishment of “Strategic Partnership of Cooperation”, in 2012 with the “Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership Based on Equality and Mutual Trust”, in 2013, with the “Win-win Cooperation and Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination”, in 2015, with the establishment of the “Comprehensive Energy Cooperation Partnership”, and finally in 2019, with the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the New Era”. These treaties deepened the trust and cooperation between the two giants, but did not constrain them to any real obligation.⁷

This highlights an especially important feature of the China–Russia Strategic Partnership: its flexibility. It is not constrained to an extremely strict set of rules or obligations and does not limit the two countries' relationship with other powers, possibly their rivals.⁸ It leaves room for negotiation, cooperation, and trade without excluding any state. An official alliance would be much more demanding and would not allow China to have a bilateral relationship with the EU and the USA while Russia is being sanctioned by them.

But how vital is this Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the two partners? And if their cooperation is so important, then why not make it into a full-fledged alliance? Even though Beijing and Moscow might seem like natural allies against the US, and both powers

⁴ Lo 2008.

⁵ Huiyun Feng 2022.

⁶ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019.

⁷ Rozman 2020.

⁸ Bolt – Cross 2018.

are definitely aware of this fact, there are several obstacles in the way. Russia still views itself as a superpower and fears that, in a formal alliance with China, it would become a secondary partner and lose the prestige and flexibility of a great power on the world stage.⁹ Meanwhile, the PRC is afraid that a formal alliance with Russia would irreversibly ruin its relations with the West, which would thus be further united against Chinese interests. But the real question is what the two countries would gain from such an alliance. The answer is simple: not much. That is the beauty of the many forms of strategic partnerships between them: they gain all the advantages of an alliance that they currently require without the main disadvantages. Both powers can focus their efforts on furthering their interests without needing to worry about their neighbors.

Overall, the two countries clearly have common geopolitical goals and need the assurance of the other to support these, or at least remain neutral. China and Russia both need this assurance so that their flanks are covered, and they do not have to waste precious resources guarding them. The two powers work together in fields that do not go against their individual interests and keep their strategic partnership flexible and non-binding. They would only form an official alliance if the tensions between the PRC and the West deteriorated to the Cold War's level of hostility and if Russia were weakened so much that it needed and accepted a China-led alliance bloc. Right now, even with Trump's increasing efforts to decouple from China as soon as possible and the war in Ukraine dragging on, it is not likely that this scenario would present itself in the near future.

SINO-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS BEFORE THE OUTBREAK OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

From the previous section, we might come to the conclusion that Russia is significantly more important to Chinese interests than Ukraine. We may not be too far from the truth, but we still should not underestimate the continued cooperation between the former Soviet state and the PRC.

China and Ukraine established formal diplomatic relations on January 4, 1992, shortly after Ukraine became independent from the Soviet Union. From the beginning, the relationship between the two countries has been characterized by mutual interest, particularly in economic cooperation and strategic asset exchanges.¹⁰ Over the decades preceding the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War, China–Ukraine relations evolved significantly.

One of the most important events in Sino-Ukrainian relations was Ukraine's sale of the unfinished aircraft carrier "Varyag" to China in 1998. The Varyag, which would later become China's first operational aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, symbolizes a critical turning point in China's naval ambitions. Ukraine sold the ship at a minimal cost (USD 20 million¹¹) under the agreement that it would not be used for military purposes – a condition China eventually bypassed through reconstruction and reclassification of the vessel.¹² The Liaoning significantly enhanced China's naval power projection capabilities, highlighting Ukraine's innocent but crucial role in China's military modernization.

⁹ Lo 2008.

¹⁰ Embassy of Ukraine in the PRC 2022.

¹¹ Erickson – Goldstein 2007.

¹² Li – Weuve 2010.

Economic ties between China and Ukraine were strong and steadily growing prior to the conflict. Ukraine's rich natural resources and strategic position made it a valuable partner in China's expanding Belt and Road Initiative. According to data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, bilateral trade between Ukraine and China increased substantially, making China Ukraine's largest trading partner by 2019.¹³ Their trade largely consisted of Ukrainian agricultural products, particularly grains and cereals, with China becoming increasingly dependent on Ukrainian corn and wheat exports to bolster its food security. China also invested significantly in the Ukrainian infrastructure and technology sectors. Chinese investment in Ukrainian ports, such as the construction of new terminals in Odessa and the expansion of cargo facilities in Mariupol,¹⁴ is a great example of that. Furthermore, Huawei, China's biggest telecommunications company, was actively involved in upgrading Ukrainian telecommunications networks, reflecting China's strategic interests in Eastern Europe's technological landscape.¹⁵

Strategically, Ukraine occupied a very important position in China's broader geopolitical interests in Europe and Eurasia. As part of its efforts to secure energy routes and diversify its global investments, China saw Ukraine as a gateway to Europe, given Ukraine's geographical location adjacent to European Union member states and its proximity to key markets and transit routes.¹⁶ The integration of Ukraine into the Belt and Road Initiative framework aimed to strengthen China's economic influence across the European continent. However, China's economic and strategic relations with Ukraine have not been without complications. Ukraine's geopolitical stance, particularly its willingness to join Western institutions like the EU and NATO, occasionally created conflict with China's diplomatic preferences. China's policy traditionally emphasizes non-interference and respects sovereign states' choices regarding international alignments. Yet, Ukraine's Western orientation increasingly complicated China's diplomatic balancing act between its partnership with Russia and economic ties with Ukraine.¹⁷

Moreover, China's position in Eastern Europe was not solely economic but also significantly political. China's strategic objective was to maintain stable diplomatic relations and avoid alienating either Russia or Ukraine, reflecting its broader diplomatic strategy of cautious neutrality and strategic ambiguity. Before the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War, China's diplomatic language towards Ukraine emphasized friendship, partnership, and mutual benefit, avoiding explicit geopolitical alignments to maintain positive bilateral relations without antagonizing Moscow.¹⁸ China's nuanced position towards Ukraine reflected broader Chinese foreign policy strategies, aiming at economic pragmatism and diplomatic flexibility. China aimed to deepen cooperation with Ukraine without compromising its long-standing strategic relationship with Russia. Ukraine's importance in China's European strategy could be viewed as part of China's attempts to enhance its global economic security and geopolitical leverage without provoking other major powers.¹⁹

¹³ State Statistics Service of Ukraine 2020.

¹⁴ Xinhua 2018.

¹⁵ Reuters 2019.

¹⁶ Legarda – Soong 2025.

¹⁷ Gabuev 2021.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2021.

¹⁹ Rozman 2020.

CHINA'S SHIFTING NARRATIVE ON THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

When we first look at the war in Ukraine, we might think that this is an opportune time for Chinese diplomacy, since the West is occupied with Russia, and this gives a much-needed breathing room for the PRC to deal with its external and internal problems. We might think that while Western weapons are sent to the Ukrainian frontlines, the question of Taiwan could be solved diplomatically or otherwise in favor of the People's Republic. However, the truth could not be further from this preconception.

China has clear strategic goals:²⁰ “by 2049, the Chinese government aims ‘to build a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious’”,²¹ and by 2035, it plans to double its economic output and become a self-sustaining economy.²² But to achieve these goals, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) must make sure that China does not get isolated from the world, since without Western markets, the Chinese economy cannot develop into a self-sustaining market.²³ That is why the outbreak of the war was not good news for China. It started a trend of deglobalization and revived NATO from its grave. A unified West could be extremely dangerous for the PRC; the sanctions implemented against Russia would be much more detrimental to the Chinese economy.

From another perspective, China also has an ideological objection to Russia's war on Ukraine since Russia recognized, then annexed, the breakaway states of Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic²⁴ from the internationally recognized borders of Ukraine. This action makes a clear parallel to the PRC's relation with Taiwan, which infuriates the CCP in two different ways. First, Russia recognized breakaway states, which is anathema to the PRC.²⁵ Under the one-China policy, countries shall not recognize Taiwan as an independent state, since it is officially part of the one, CCP-ruled, Beijing-centered Chinese state. If China supported Russia's claims on these lands, then the PRC would go against its own policy, thus undermining it. Second, Russia set a bad example by justifying its “Special Military Operation” on historical claims, stating that Ukraine never existed as a nation, and its being an independent country is a historical tragedy that should not have happened.²⁶ China has a similar stance on Taiwan. It fears that, if tensions escalate and an armed conflict breaks out between the PRC and Taiwan, then the international community would condemn China as the aggressor, even though China considers the Taiwan issue as an internal matter. There might be an even greater chance of international condemnation now than there was in 2022, before the invasion of Ukraine. Most UN countries condemned Russia and stood against Israel in the Hamas war because they feared that normalizing the violent resolution of conflicts could destabilize the global system.

So, it seems that China is very much in a constrained position about Ukraine. If it supported Russia more openly, maybe even militarily, it would risk deepening cooperation among Western states against the PRC and accelerate decoupling, thus making the PRC's long-term economic goals impossible and further militarize the Taiwan question. It would

²⁰ National Development and Reform Commission 2024.

²¹ Overseas Development Institute 2021.

²² Godement – Pinhas 2025; Havrén 2021.

²³ Economist Intelligence Unit 2023.

²⁴ Putin 2022.

²⁵ Shulong 2001.

²⁶ Putin 2021.

also complicate China's relationship with other countries that support Ukraine's fight for its territorial sovereignty and condemn Russia as the clear aggressor, while not agreeing with the West either. In their eyes, China would fulfil the prophecy of the China Threat theory and would become the aggressive dictator that the West always warned about. Nevertheless, if China were to abandon its support and condemn Russia, it would create an adversary on its exceedingly long northern border, while not gaining much in return.²⁷ The West would still view the PRC as a strategic and ideological rival, and it would not stop the USA's enormous efforts to decouple and reindustrialize it.

Therefore, China is in a position where, if it moves in any direction, things could get much worse than they are right now. China can still decrease or increase its quiet economic support for Russia, make a statement condemning the West for its aggressive expansion of NATO, or declare solidarity for Ukraine, but these tools only allow an extremely limited flexibility for Beijing. China is forced into neutrality in the Ukraine War because of the current geopolitical environment. If it were to change course, it would have to sacrifice a lot to gain very little.

Is this constrained position reflected in the Chinese foreign policy? According to a study by You Xu and Xiru Zhao from Waseda University, Tokyo, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) made 688 statements about the War in Ukraine. Out of those posts, 123 were classified as pro-Russian, 151 as pro-Ukraine, and 414 were considered neutral.²⁸ A statement from the Chinese MFA is considered pro-Russian if it contains words and segments that reflect China's understanding of Moscow's "legitimate defensive measures" and criticizes the West for its aggressive expansion of NATO, its unilateral sanctions on Russia, and its military support for Ukraine. A pro-Ukrainian statement highlights that China supports a diplomatic resolution to the Ukrainian crisis, recognizes the Ukrainian government (while Russia does not), and mentions China's friendly relations with Ukraine. Meanwhile, a neutral stance reflects China's willingness to mediate in the conflict and uphold the international rule of law. From these actions, we can come to the conclusion that China is, in fact, in a precarious position when it comes to Ukraine, and the Chinese MFA tries to maintain this balance.

CHINA'S ROLE IN A POTENTIAL UKRAINIAN PEACE DEAL

China mentioned many times its willingness to mediate in the conflict.²⁹ But how realistic is a Beijing-negotiated end to hostilities? Could it hurt or improve the chances of peace? There are many obstacles in the way, and it might not even be worth the trouble for the PRC. In the following segment, these questions will be analyzed and answered.

First of all, we should ask ourselves: Is it in China's best interest to end the war in Ukraine? The answer should be obvious since Beijing has stated many times the need for a diplomatic resolution of the conflict.³⁰ However, official statements and positions are not always the best indicators of a country's true intentions. Even though China has made grand proposals, its actions have never exceeded wise words. Is this the case because of the reasons mentioned in the previous chapters, or does the PRC have an ulterior motive to continue the war? Let's see what China could win from a prolonged war.

²⁷ Huiyun Feng 2022.

²⁸ Xu – Zhao 2025.

²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2024.

³⁰ Ni 2022.

With the conflict continuing for years, the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Russia could further evolve, and Russian economic dependency on China would most certainly deepen.³¹ With Russia focusing more and more of its resources on Ukraine, China would be in a position to further develop its ties with the Central Asian STAN countries, thanks to Russia's weakened position in the region. Further cooperation with Russia could also mean that captured Western equipment could fall into Chinese hands and could be reverse-engineered, which would boost Chinese military development efforts significantly.³²

Nevertheless, the continuation of the war would trigger relatively more negative effects for China. For example, even though the war would divert Western resources from other parts of the globe, it would not mean an overall Western withdrawal from Asia. Quite the contrary, there would be an ever-growing demand for Western weapons, which would facilitate the further expansion of the Western defense industry.³³ The ongoing war would also strengthen Western unity and NATO.³⁴ The question of Taiwan would also become much more complicated, since the probability of a united Western action against "Chinese aggression" has been growing every day since the war began.³⁵ The war also intensified the progress of deglobalization, which started during the COVID-19 pandemic. These trends all go against long-term Chinese strategies and would hamper decades of planning and development.³⁶

All in all, we can safely conclude that China is indeed interested in ending the war in Ukraine. But how great a part could the PRC play in the peace talks? If China took a seat at the negotiations, then it would find itself once again in a very precarious situation. It would have to maintain a neutral presence, which might be very difficult.

On the one hand, the Western powers would need an extreme amount of convincing to accept the PRC as mediator since most Western countries, including the USA, see China as a primarily pro-Russian and not as a neutral party.³⁷ So, in order to appease Western concerns, China would need to abruptly stop all of its pro-Russian rhetoric (for example, not blame the West as a major contributor to the outbreak of the war with the aggressive eastern expansion of NATO), which would undoubtedly ruffle some feathers in Russia. On the other hand, Russia would expect greater gains from the war if China decided to mediate, and any concessions to the Ukrainian side would definitely mean a decline in future Russia–China relations. Thus, China would once again be in a position where it needs to support Russia to a certain extent to sustain their comprehensive strategic partnership, while not upsetting the West too much. Maintaining this complex position is fairly difficult for Beijing in the current geopolitical environment without getting involved in the conflict, but being the mediator would certainly make it even harder.³⁸

This raises the question: why would the PRC want to mediate between Ukraine and Russia? What could China gain from being the mediator? Well, the risks absolutely outweigh the benefits. China could seem like a more mature and fairer superpower than the USA to

³¹ Kashin 2024.

³² Rakesh 2024.

³³ Council of the European Union 2024.

³⁴ Bishara 2023.

³⁵ Frauen 2023.

³⁶ Pei 2022.

³⁷ EU's Top Diplomat Says China Could Facilitate, Not Mediate, Peace in Ukraine 2023.

³⁸ Seiwert 2023.

the rest of the world if the negotiations bore fruit, but their success seems bleak. A failed Beijing-led peace negotiation could undermine China's prestige and deteriorate Western or Russian relations, possibly both.

For these reasons, we can conclude that even though it is in China's best interest to end the war as soon as possible, taking a leading part in the negotiations is not worthwhile for it.

CONCLUSION AND CLOSING THOUGHTS

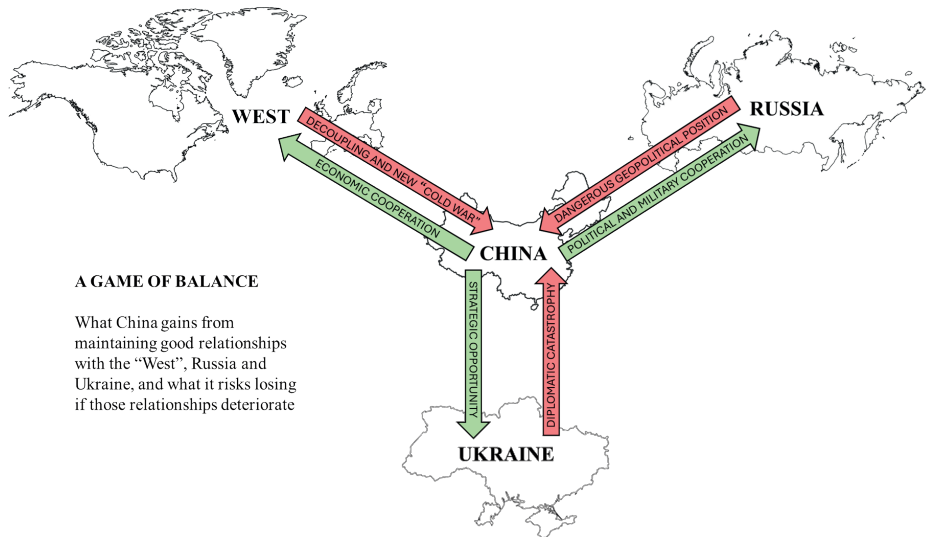


Figure 1 *A Game of Balance*

Source: *author*

Chinese foreign policy seems to have found the most advantageous position on the subject of the Ukraine War. Its pseudo-neutral stance appears to satisfy Russian expectations deriving from their strategic partnership without upsetting the West and alienating itself from Western markets vital to Chinese long-term strategy (Figure 1). It looks like China does not plan to get involved directly in the war or the peace negotiations, even though a swift end to the conflict is its desired outcome. From the European perspective, China raised no objections to Ukraine's accession to the EU, since its geopolitical and economic strategy views the country as a gateway to Europe, and Ukraine's integration into the EU would further consolidate its economic influence over the bloc.

On July 2, 2025, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with the EU's High Representative and Vice-President Kaja Kallas and was reported to have said that China "did not want to see a Russian loss in Ukraine because it feared the United States would then shift its whole focus to Beijing."³⁹ Could this mean that China finally revealed its support for Russia? Is this the big turning point in China's strategy regarding the Ukraine War? The answer to these questions is a definite no. Two days later, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning commented on Wang Yi's alleged remark, saying, "China is not a party

³⁹ Bermingham 2025.

to the Ukraine issue. China's position on the Ukraine crisis is objective and consistent, that is, negotiation, ceasefire, and peace. A prolonged Ukraine crisis serves no one's interests. China supports a political settlement to the crisis as early as possible. Together with the international community and in light of the will of the parties concerned, we will continue playing a constructive role towards this end."⁴⁰ This official statement once again reaffirmed China's neutral stance on the Ukraine War.

China would not change its position without a major shift in the geopolitical landscape. If either of the two pillars (Russian cooperation and Western economic dependence) changes drastically, then Beijing would be inclined to change course. For example, if Russia were to shift its rhetoric to an anti-Chinese, US-friendly position, China could be more prone to cooperate with the EU and Ukraine. A more realistic scenario could be a completely decoupled West. While the USA, under the current Trump administration, took major steps towards that, without the complete cooperation of the EU, China would still have access to the European market. It can even be argued that a decoupled USA would make the PRC more dependent on European markets, so a shift towards Russia is even less probable.

All in all, we can conclude that China would not change its complex relationship to the Russo-Ukrainian War in the near future. It is forced into this role, but it maintains a high level of flexibility. China has the ability to slightly change its rhetoric to better adapt to the ever-changing geopolitical landscape, and if the PRC's interests dictate a drastic change in its attitude, then it could do so immediately. It shows that even now, Chinese foreign policy is rational rather than being dictated by an ideological standpoint, and China always positions itself to come out on top.

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⁴⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025.

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