

The Role and Effects of the Russian-Ukrainian War in the Geopolitical Rivalry of the US and China: The Unfolding Thucydides Trap

Szilárd Boros*

University of Pécs, Hungary

Abstract

The geopolitical power rivalry between the US and China has intensified considerably in recent years, but the two superpowers are currently only waging direct war against each other through economic means. In February 2022, Russia's attack on Ukraine opened up a new geopolitical scene on the US side. In this article, we examine the effects of the Russian war in Ukraine on the balance of power between the two superpowers. In the first part, we will examine the importance and role of Ukraine for the US and China in terms of geopolitical strategies, and the role that the two superpowers have played in the political and economic developments in Ukraine in recent years. In the second part of the article, we will summarise the shift in the relationship between the two superpowers in the light of the main political and economic events of the year since the beginning of the war.

Keywords: *US, China, geopolitics, Russian-Ukrainian war, Thucydides trap, hegemony-bipolarity-multipolarity*

1. Global Power Dynamics in the Early 2020s: The Thucydides Trap in a Unipolar, Bipolar and Multipolar World

The United States of America is still the world's leading power and a global player, but it can no longer enforce its decisions and interests globally as effectively as it was able to around the millennium, having suffered a number of legitimacy and reputational losses as a hegemonic power over the past 20 years. Since the 2008 economic crisis, the US hegemonic power status has increasingly started to erode both economically and politically on the Asian continent, while only China¹ remains a real threat to its global hegemonic role (Boros, 2018).

According to the results of the Lowy Institute's Geopolitical Influence and Power Index², the power differential between the two superpowers would have narrowed by 2020, with the gap between the two countries' indices narrowing to a level that foreshadowed the Thucydides Trap during the last year of the Trump administration. With the election of President Biden, the US has entered a new period in its geopolitics, in which the US strategic goal of remaining the world's leading power remains unchanged, but the tactical part has changed. The soft and then hard policy of containment that characterised the China policy of the Obama and Trump administrations was replaced by a reorganisation and tightening of the US-centric political-economic-military alliance system and its increasingly marked separation from the other blocs, which can be assessed as a bipolarity-based containment policy (Boros, 2021).

The current era, which may span several decades, is characterised by hegemony, bipolarity and multipolarity at the same time. The US continues to maintain its hegemonic position, with minor cracks, within its own systems of military and economic cooperation, within the West³. At the same time, Washington, using its influence and preponderance of political, economic and cultural power within the West, has begun to

reorganise the world in an ideologically bipolar way. According to the current international narrative of US, Washington leads an alliance of democratic states due to its privileged position, while on the opposite the autocratic, dictatorial states and their supporting states are preparing to weaken and dismantle the liberal, rule based international order⁴. In recent years, the US has also begun to decouple the economies of the two major blocs intensively (Boros and Kolozsi, 2019), which resulted in the intensification of deglobalisation processes.

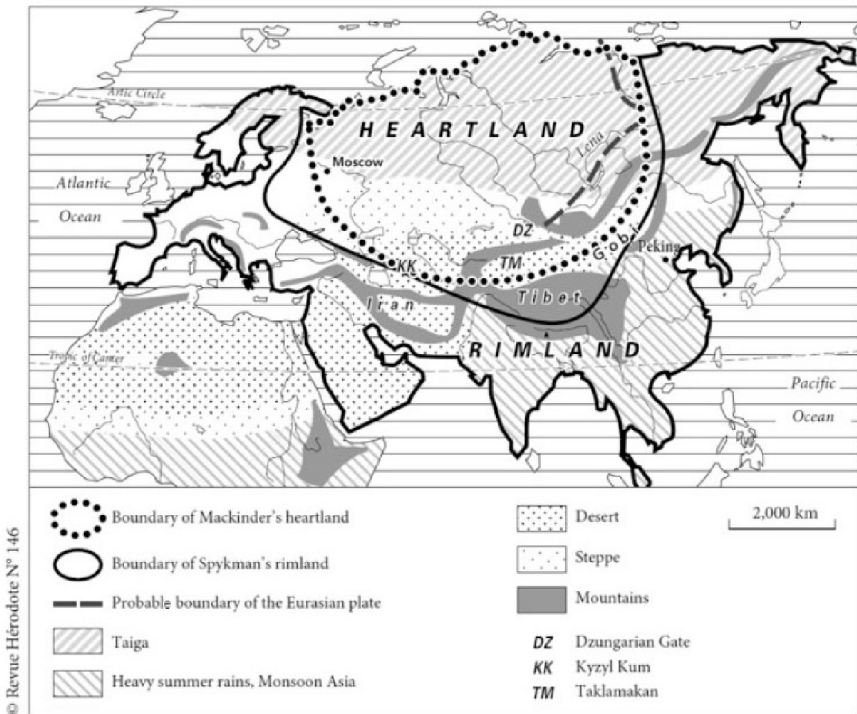
Multipolarity is represented primarily by countries outside the US alliance system, which seek to counter the negative effects of US political, economic and military actions and to mitigate them through primarily economic and secondarily politico-military cooperation. For various reasons China, Russia and Iran are the major players in this multipolar bloc on the Asian continent. The international organisations that best express this multipolarity are BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), whose role in Asia and many other parts of the world has been significantly enhanced in recent times. In addition to the multipolar institutions and organisations, the countries participating in the multipolar system are also intensifying their bilateral economic and political relations.

2. Geopolitical Role of Ukraine in the Geostrategy of the US

Based on Halford John Mackinder's heartland theory (1904, 1919), Ukraine is part of the Eurasian heartland. Whoever has the controlling power over Ukraine has a significant influence on the power relations over the Eurasian continent. This theory was complemented by the work of Spykman (1944), who argued that control over the periphery/rimland around the heartland is also a key factor in determining global power

relations and the balance of power. During the Cold War, countries located in this geographic area served as the basis for the prominent theatres of contestation between the two superpowers of the US and Soviet Union (e.g. China, Afghanistan).

Figure 1 Heartland Theory of Halford J. Mackinder



Source: Suban Kumar Chowdhury and Abdullah Hel Kafi (2015). The Heartland theory of Sir Halford John Mackinder: Justification of foreign policy of the United States and Russia in Central Asia. *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 58-70 (Open access article made available under a Creative Commons (CC) BY licence), at *Semantic Scholar* <<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Heartland-theory-of-Sir-Halford->

*John-Mackinder%3A-Chowdhury-Kafi/0258e0cabd0f674eb63d08fe5f8d4d83b8a6b475> / Social Science Open Access Repository (SSOAR) <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/44627/ssoar-jlibertyintaff-2015-2-chowdhury_et_al-The_heartland_theory_of_Sir.pdf?sequence=1> (Original source: Yves Lacoste (2012). «Le pivot géographique de l'histoire»: une lecture critique. *Hérodote*, 2012/3-4 (n° 146-147), pages 139-158.)*

For more than two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, the global hegemony of the US seemed uncontested, but even in the 1990s there were authors who sensed that human history had only temporarily come to a standstill. According to Samuel Huntington (1996), the next major clashes will be between the various major cultural territories whose borders will serve as prime sites for the actual wars. In this vision, Ukraine is also the frontier of Orthodox civilization in relation to the Western Christian cultural space, i.e. it is also a prominent potential site of a clash of civilizations. In the light of the above mentioned, it can be said that Ukraine is one of the key geopolitical locations.

As early as 1997, in his book *The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzeziński examined how the US could maintain its global leadership in the long term. Brzeziński assumed that the US would lose its dominant position in the coming decades, both externally and internally. The world is slowly shifting in a multipolar direction, with China as its main challenger. In this environment, the US can, in its view, only maintain its leading power by influencing the rise of regional powers, their relations and positions in a divide and rule⁵ manner that does not threaten its global primacy. In 1997, Brzeziński still saw Russia's orientation towards the West and economic and social modernisation based on a market economy as the way forward.

In *Strategic Vision*, 2012, Brzeziński revisited the question of Russia's integration and the factors that bind it together and continue to separate it from Europe. He identified as the strongest link between them

the economic interdependence (exchange of cheap Russian raw materials, resources and advanced European technology), especially with Germany. The other vital link is Russia's intellectual and spiritual aspirations to be an integral part of Europe since the 18th century. He concludes that integration cannot be successful because Russia wants a special, dominant status within Europe because of its size and resources, but to achieve this Moscow is economically weak and politically and ideologically too far from European democratic forms of organisation, and unwilling to make the necessary reforms because of its excessive attachment to its imperial past.

The same book also identifies Ukraine as geopolitically one of the most vulnerable countries, facing the problem and challenges of the West-East trade-off, similar to Russia, but with a much weaker geographic, economic and military position and much greater vulnerability to the great powers. The country's weak position is fundamentally determined by the fact that it was established as a sovereign state in 1992, which makes its political establishment and elite ineffective, and its economic and cultural dependence and vulnerability on Russia, while its political leadership and population want to integrate with Europe. According to Brzeziński, if Russia annexes Belarus, Ukraine's situation and goals will become even more difficult to achieve.

George Friedman (2012, 2015) has put the relationship between Russia and the intermediary Europe (the axis from the Baltic States to Romania) in a different perspective. In his opinion, the US had the opportunity in the 1990s to make the former Soviet Union disintegrated and geopolitically completely harmless, but missed the chance because the current US administrations reckoned the complete disintegration of the country as a greater disadvantage than an advantage. In the 2000s, with Putin's rise to power and the launch of the US war on terror in

2001, the US had the resources only enough to strengthen its presence in the peripheral countries that surrounded Russia by reinforcing democratic engagement. At the same time, Russia has changed its strategy and perspective with Putin's arrival. On the one hand, Putin recognised that economically he would not be able to develop Russia up to the level of the developed countries, so he focused on the export of raw materials and energy resources, with Germany as his main partner. On the other side, he increasingly saw US policy efforts along the Russian border as anti-Russian moves with Cold War logics.

Friedmann is ambiguous in the definition of US goals. On the one hand he recognised the importance and necessity of Russian-European cooperation based on economic-trade (cheap raw materials and energy for technology), on the other hand he suggested that the US should undermine this cooperation because a successful German-Russian cooperation could threaten US influence in Europe⁶. Friedman believes that the intermediary Europe is the key to undermining German-Russian cooperation. The US must rely primarily on Poland and Romania to keep Russia at a distance from Germany. He sees the situation in Ukraine as dubious because of the country's cultural and political mixing. However, he describes the Carpathians as a vitally important line of defence for Russia, and says that in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s eastward expansion, including Ukraine, would be unacceptable for Russia after the accession of the Central European countries.

The above assessed strategies show that for the US, Ukraine is a potential strategic factor in changing Russia's position as a great power. The country, as its name implies, is an external defensive perimeter to Russia's core territory (Moscow and Saint Petersburg). If Ukraine, like the Baltic States, is taken over from the Russian sphere of influence (into the Western), Russia's global power position will be challenged

fundamentally. The potential loss of Ukraine would mean for Russia a complete retrenchment to the Asian continent and a fatal weakening of its ability to influence European and global geopolitical processes.

However, given that the main US adversary is China and the Biden administration's ambitions in this regard, the US objective in Ukraine is likely to be to break Russian imperial political consciousness, to weaken the country economically and militarily to the point of losing its former ability to influence geopolitical scene in Europe and the Balkans, thus placing the US in a position of exclusive hegemony over European economic-political processes. As Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin has put it (*The Washington Post*, 25th April 2022), to weaken Russia to the point where it loses its great power status for good, and as President Biden has stated (BBC, 27th March 2022), to replace Putin's authoritarian semi-democratic political system with a liberal political system, probably similar to that of the 1990s, heavily influenced by the West. If the US could achieve its optimal strategic goals, it would gain significant resources for its own economy and alliance systems that would result in a significant increase in its ability to exert geopolitical pressure on China. For the US, therefore, the separation of Ukraine from Russia's sphere of influence would be a critical economic and political factor in a more intense future confrontation with China.

3. Geopolitical Role of Ukraine for China

Ukraine's role in Chinese geopolitics is also easier to define. Although China's foreign policy has become more active and assertive since Xi Jinping (习近平) came to power in 2012 (Sørensen, 2015), Chinese geopolitics is still fundamentally determined by economic issues, especially with regard to countries further away from the country's borders. As Ukraine is geographically distant from Beijing, Kyiv (Kiev)

has been and continues to be of primary importance of economic issues to China.

Sino-Ukrainian relations were established with the formal establishment of Ukraine, and between 1992 and 2004 bilateral relations were low in intensity, but had political, economic, military and cultural scope as well. Under the Viktor Yushchenko government (2005-10), bilateral relations drifted apart, but after 2010 cooperation became stronger again. China's economic relations with Ukraine gradually became more intense in the 2010s, well-illustrated by the fact that in 2019 China was Ukraine's largest trading partner. Over the past decade, China has made increasing investments in the country, mainly related to agriculture and the Belt and Road Initiative (Gerasymchuk and Poita, 2018).

Ukraine plays a moderately important role in China's geopolitical perspective. Within the BRI, its role in land transport to Europe is prominent but not exclusive. Ukraine is crossed by one of the main BRI rail transport routes linked to the Northern Corridor, and the Black Sea ports are important for alternative transport routes linked to the Central Corridor. For China, Ukraine is a transit country, through which Chinese goods flow towards developed European receiving end-markets.

There is another key factor in Ukraine which makes the country more valuable to China, it is its valuable arable land. As Chinese society has become richer in the last decades, the pattern of food consumption by the population has changed, which China cannot fully meet from its own agricultural resources, so Beijing is looking to all continents to meet the country's food needs. Ukraine has some of the best quality arable land in the world, so China's investment in the Ukrainian land market and agriculture is a natural fit. However, China is seeking mutually beneficial business opportunities by developing infrastructure and supplying agricultural technology in exchange for land. Although

China's FDI stock in Ukraine is relatively low, it has increased the most intensively of all the major powers in recent years (*Pravda*, 12th December 2022).

Although China's foreign policy is based on the principle of non-interference in the internal politics of other countries, Beijing cannot ignore the fact that Ukraine is a transit country not only in economic sense, but also in political one. In strengthening its economic relations with Ukraine, China could not ignore its geopolitical values of the country, i.e. the fact that over the past decade Kyiv has increasingly slid from the Russian sphere of interest to the Western. Ukraine is clearly a highly important focal point in the power contest between the US-led West and Russia, and therefore also offers opportunities for Beijing to indirectly shape its own broader geopolitics. To better understand this, China's opportunities must first be examined in more depth in terms of Ukraine's slide into the Western sphere of interest.

4. The Main Elements of Russia-US Geopolitical Rivalry in Ukraine after the Millennium: The Violation of the Russian Imperial Interests

Ukraine was economically and politically part of the sphere of interest of Russia in two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the political influence of the US in the country began to rise after the regime change and continued after the millennium (Wilson, 2006). The first successes of the US-led West in the country were achieved with the Orange Revolution of 2004, which overthrew the post-Soviet regime based on the legitimate dissatisfaction of the population with the performance of the political system. The following elections resulted in a more pro-Western political coalition led by Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko. The period 2004-2010 was a period of increasing

Western economic penetration, with a number of large Western companies investing in Ukraine (Statista, 2022). The corruption in the country, the oligarchic structure that pervades the political and economic system, the stagnation of the average standard of living, and the political leadership's disregard for the interests of the significant Russian minority have been serious problems in the country since the birth of independent Ukraine, and from time to time generated the fall the current government (Minakov and Rojansky, 2021).

Building on these problems, the 2010 presidential election was won by a pro-Russian politician, Viktor Yanukovich, and as a result, the country's foreign policy also focused more on normalising and strengthening its traditionally closer relations with Russia, while continuing to cultivate existing ties and channels with the West (US and EU). Yanukovich tried to use the opportunities offered by the country's transit situation to negotiate the most advantageous economic-political deal for the country by means of a swinging foreign policy between the major powers. Ukraine finally received the better offer from Russia in 2013, which the Ukrainian President planned to accept (*The Guardian*, 18th December 2013). However, the negotiation process was accompanied by growing social discontent over the existing problems and the shift away from a Western orientation, which culminated in the Maidan revolution immediately after the Russian offer was received. The revolution soon escalated into a civil war, resulting in the constitutionally questionable removal of Yanukovich from power in 2014.

After 2014, the presidents of Ukraine (Oleksandr Turchynov, Petro Poroshenko, Volodymyr Zelenskyy) were fundamentally committed to integration of the country to the West. The 2014 political coup d'état in Russia's perception also made Moscow implement counter strike on the country. Russia annexed Crimea, which has a predominantly Russian-

speaking population, to the mainland by covert military means and politically by following the example of the 1999 Kosovo independence process (ICJ, 2010). The Russian act was not accepted by the international community, and the US-led West, mainly the European Union (EU) introduced a series of economic and political sanctions against Russia in retaliation. However, this did not settle the situation in Ukraine, where regions with a significant Russian ethnic population (Donetsk and Lugansk) wanted to gain independence from Ukraine with Russia's support claiming that Kyiv was oppressing the minorities of the country by anti-minority laws and measures. The situation escalated into a military conflict and civil war, which the parties tried to settle through German and French mediation in the framework of the 2014-2015 Minsk agreements. However, the agreements were not successful, as the parties involved (the Ukrainian state and the regions declaring their independence) violated the agreements on several occasions over the years (Åtland, 2020).

In 2017, Donald Trump came to power in the US, and one of his main foreign policy objectives in the framework of his America First policy was to withdraw the US from its extensive international role and to settle its foreign policy relations on a bilateral basis (Larres, 2017), and to focus more on solving its domestic socio-economic problems. However, the accusations throughout his presidency that he won the presidential election with Russian help, as well as the constant attacks by foreign policy actors of previous presidential administrations, the administration's internal opposition and the political pressure from the US arms lobby have limited his ability to rebuild and rebalance US relations with Russia. Overall, Trump's presidency has only succeeded in blunting and slowing down the geopolitical goals of previous presidential administrations to weaken Russia through deeper integration of Ukraine into the Western sphere of interests. This is well illustrated

by the fact that during 2017-2021, while Trump negotiated with Putin on several occasions to reach a settlement, the US administration's agencies contributed significantly to the modernisation of the organisation and infrastructure of the Ukrainian armed forces (Welt, 2020).

Russia's more limited economic resources compared to the US were heavily tied down, in addition to the situation in Ukraine, by the conflict in Syria and by the efforts to preserve the country's geopolitical influence in the Central Asian and Caucasian ex-Soviet states, which were exclusively under Russian influence before 1990. Ukraine was a frozen conflict from 2014-2019, which largely suited Russia's interests, as Kyiv legally was not able to deepen further its integration with the West (EU and NATO) due to the civil war situation. A further factor in Russia's favour was that the Western-oriented Ukrainian political leadership was unable to address the country's fundamental socio-economic problems, and its internal political support was therefore steadily eroding.

The country's role began to re-emerge to the geopolitical focus of Russia after Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected to the presidential office of Ukraine in 2019. The country has embarked on significant political and economic reforms, with mixed results (*Eurasianet*, 15th April 2021). The country initiated a constitutional amendment in 2019, envisaging the country's future accession to NATO. Subsequently, Russia repeatedly and increasingly forcefully expressed to the international community, and in particular to the US-led West, its security concerns about Ukraine's NATO membership and the potential deployment of US medium- and long-range missile systems in the country (*The Guardian*, 17th December 2021).

After the US-led West refused to negotiate Russian security demands on the grounds of Ukraine's sovereignty, Russia launched its current special operation in Ukraine in February 2022. The special

military operation as Russian political elite calls it or war has been ongoing for more than a year, with the fronts frozen from a military point of view in the late autumn of 2022. After the failure of the first phase, using the experience of Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014 (surprise and popular support of the local population), the war has evolved into a war of supplies and materials. At the same time, the US and the EU on the other side started to support Ukraine with military equipment and ammunition and with vital financial means (e.g.: loans, funds, aids). Today, a stalemate situation has developed on the territory of the breakaway states, which is drawing heavily on the resources of both Russia and the Western alliance supporting Ukraine.

5. China-Russia Relations during the War

Relations between China and Russia have developed significantly since the 2010s. Despite the traditional geopolitical concerns and difficulties of the two countries (e.g. historical Chinese grievances and mistrust, the Chineseisation of the Russian Far East, power rivalries in Central Asian countries), initiatives from the top-level of the politics and external pressure of the US have resulted in a dynamic development of political, economic and military cooperation between the two countries (Korolev and Portyakov, 2019). The two countries' relations have been most visibly manifested in the rise in bilateral trade in Russian raw materials, military technology and Chinese goods, as well as in increasingly close military cooperation and the increase in the number of joint military exercises (Sun, 2022). In a further step in the development of relations, the two countries entered into a Strategic Partnership in 2021.

Despite the developing political, economic and military relations, Putin's visit to Beijing in early February 2022 and his bilateral joint statement, Chinese diplomacy at the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian

war reacted to the events of the war in a cautious, neutral and balanced manner, which can be attributed to three main factors. The first is that Chinese diplomacy is traditionally deliberative, China- and economy-centred rather than global and political, so for Beijing the Russia-Ukraine war was initially local in nature. The second is that the COVID epidemic since 2020 and its countervailing zero-Covid policy have slowed the dynamics of Chinese diplomacy and also restricted its ability to manoeuvre through restrictions on the face-to-face meetings and strict entry measures. From 2020 onwards, Chinese diplomacy radically reduced its direct, personal activity in the international arena, as illustrated by the fact that Xi Jinping did not leave the country for a diplomatic visit from January 2020, following the outbreak of COVID, until September 2022. The third factor for caution is that for Beijing, in line with the 100-year goals (Yang, 2019), ensuring the country's economic development and population growth is the primary strategic issue. An immediate firm engagement with Russia would have posed significant risks on the Chinese economy given the negative impact of possible Western reactions to the engagement.

However, as the war progressed, the official statements of Chinese diplomacy increasingly contradicted the US position on Russia. In March 2022, China's ambassador to the US argued for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, but in September, the chairman of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress Li Zhanshu (栗戰書) said that China understood and supported Russia in the Ukrainian situation. China's refusal to classify Russia's military intervention as war at the G20 summit in Bali in November 2022 was a further sign of Beijing's political support for Moscow.

Economically, China has benefited from the Russian war in Ukraine on both the import and export side. One of the biggest winners from Europe's divorce from Russian imports of raw materials and energy

resources has been China, which has significantly increased its Russian imports of both gas and oil. On the export side, China has substituted products from Western firms withdrawing from the Russian market for many consumer goods and key industrial intermediates. Although the US has tried to cut Russia off completely from the market for chips, essential for the supply of advanced military equipment, there are reports claiming that China has helped Russia in this respect too. The growing economic cooperation between the two countries is indicated by the fact that trade between the two countries set a new record in 2022, reaching USD 190 billion (*The Moscow Times*, 30th December 2022). There are no confirmed sources yet that China is supplying military equipment to Russia. One reason for this may be that the US has repeatedly warned Beijing that the supply of weapons or military equipment and supplies could lead to a further significant deterioration of relations between the two countries, including the imposition of economic sanctions against China (*Al Jazeera*, 13th March 2022).

Although the Russia-Ukraine war is not a major geopolitical focus point for China, Beijing did not abandon Russia on its own. Economically, China is making the most of this favourable situation to strengthen its own economic position. On the political side, Beijing's increasingly close cooperation with Russia has seen its diplomatic outreach gradually shift from neutral to understanding and supportive of Russia.

6. China-US Relations during the War

When evaluating China-US relations, it cannot be ignored that Beijing's economic and political relations with the US have already become very volatile after Xi Jinping took office in 2012, and have been deteriorating since the outbreak of the US initiated trade war in 2018, and have not

improved since President Biden took office (Boros, 2021). Overall, it can be said that US-China relations were frosty even before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war and that the bilateral relations have witnessed a further deterioration.

US policy towards the Republic of China (ROC) has also played an important role in the further alienation of bilateral relations. A US House of Representatives delegation to Taiwan, led by Speaker Nancy Pelosi, first reported in April, finally took place in August 2022.⁷ During the visit, the Speaker reaffirmed the US commitment to its allies in the region and expressed her belief that democracies are struggling with autocratic regimes in the current period, in which the US, as a bulwark of democracies, is committed to protecting its allies.

Meanwhile, China has vehemently protested the US action, claiming Washington violates the One China principle and interferes in the internal affairs of the People's Republic of China. Xi Jinping used stronger language than usual in Chinese diplomacy regarding the visit, as for China, strengthening official relations with the ROC is considered interference in its internal affairs. Words were followed by action, as immediately after the visit China carried out the largest naval military exercise in its history around the island and in the region (*South China Morning Post*, 3rd August 2022). Furthermore, the Chinese Communist Party's constitution was amended at the 20th Congress with the official opposition to Taiwan's independence.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China announced at the end of April, almost simultaneously with the first public news about the US delegation's visit to Taiwan, that Chinese-Russian relations had reached a new level and could serve as a model for the new international order (Bloomberg, 29th April 2022). The spokesman also explained that the US-led NATO's Cold War thinking and expansionism were largely responsible for the events in

Ukraine. China's policy towards Russia has become increasingly supportive and its economic cooperation has strengthened, as explained in the previous section.

The US has taken advantage of China's political sensitivity and overreactions to US delegation to Taiwan's to initiate new economic sanctions. In October 2022, in addition to previous trade restrictive and technological sanctions, the US Department of Commerce adopted restrictions on the export of machinery that facilitates the manufacture of advanced computers and semiconductors to China. The measure was joined by ROC and the Netherlands, which have the capacity to produce such machines outside the US. With this measure, the US has made it even more difficult for China to obtain and produce more advanced chips. Some argue that the measures could slow down the development of Chinese industry and the development of the most advanced industries by years. In addition to the economic measures, the US has also provided military assistance to ROC to reinforce its military in case of a potential Chinese invasion.

Economically, the US has continued on the path it has already embarked on to slow China's rise, primarily by limiting the availability of semiconductors and chips essential to the production chains of modern industries. On the political side, the US has inconvenienced China by tightening its political and military ties with the Republic of China and has tried to put China in a situation similar to that of Ukraine.

7. The Russian-Ukrainian War from the Perspective of Hegemony-Bipolarity-Multipolarity

The US, relying on its international political and diplomatic leverage and its ability to thematise the international space, tried to isolate Russia completely from the rest of the world, both politically and economically,

in the early days of the war. However, the experience and results of the past year show that this effort has had only limited success.

In the international political sphere, the US has tried to isolate Russia in the first instance in the UN. In the vote in the Security Council of the United Nations on stopping Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow rejected the initiative, and China, India and the United Arab Emirates, among the major geopolitical powers, stayed away from the vote (UNSC, 27th February 2022). The subsequent UN General Assembly emergency special session's vote also failed to reach a unanimous decision, with 73% of member states voting in favour of the resolution, with only Russia and its four closest allies voting against, while 24% of member states, including China, India, Iran, South Africa, abstained or did not participate in the vote.

Following the UN votes, the US has shifted the focus of its main actions against Russia towards economic measures within its alliance system and military support of Ukraine. Today, it can be outlined that while the Atlantic part of Alliance (EU) supports the anti-Russia position in all dimensions (political, economic, military), the Pacific allies show less commitment to isolate Russia due to the geographically remote and local nature of the conflict. At the political level, they condemn the war and provide symbolic military assistance to Ukraine, but self-interest is more predominant in these countries in terms of economic sanctions.

On the economy, the more than 15,000 sanctions measures imposed on Russia have had limited results in the first year. Due to the interdependence between global supply and production chains and actors in the world economy, the parties have avoided a significant share of sanctions on products and raw materials by using the well-known Cold War techniques of trade intermediation (e.g. insertion of a third neutral state) and sanctions evasion (e.g. transshipment at sea – neutral territory). Sanctions fundamentally slow down and make global production chains

more expensive, most tangibly reflected in rising inflation. The analysis currently available suggests that the impact of sanctions will have a significant longer-term impact on the Russian economy (Putz, 2022). The US has gradually focused more on services and technology sanctions (e.g. SWIFT closure for Russian banks) alongside products, which have proved more successful. Washington is also placing increasing emphasis on strengthening its own economy (IRA) and on politically stressing to its allies the need for full separation of economic and production systems from the non-Western countries (mainly China).

However, the EU is suffering the greatest economic strain of the anti-Russian sanction policy in the West through rising commodity and energy prices. The production costs of energy-intensive industries in European economies have risen exponentially with the reduction and cessation of Russian import. Many companies of European importance are either ceasing production (e.g. BSAF) due to the increased and unsustainable costs or are considering relocating production to other countries (e.g. German automotive industry), including the US. Europe's energy supply is also in a precarious position due to significant raw material exposure to Russia. However, there have been no major power outages or curtailments in 2022 due to the storing of the Russian gas and oil before sanctions came into force and milder winters. However, according to the latest estimates published by the European Commission, European countries could face a shortfall of 30 billion cubic metres of gas by 2023, which could cause significant energy disruptions during the winter. As a result of the economic sanctions, Russia's economic performance in 2022 fell more moderately than previously expected (*The Economist*, 29th December 2022), while Europe's global competitiveness continued to deteriorate significantly. Europe's competitiveness deterioration will benefit the US the most through a surge in raw material and resource exports and the relocation of

European capital and energy-intensive manufacturing capacity. Current analysis suggests that the impact of sanctions will have a significant longer-term impact on the Russian economy.

The geopolitically more significant countries outside the Western alliance (e.g. China, India, Brazil, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran) have condemned the war and called for the parties to enter into cease-fire and peace agreements, but have not held Russia the solely responsible for the war. Contrary to the US diplomatic efforts to isolate Russia completely from the world, bilateral and multilateral political and economic cooperation in Asia has intensified and intensified in the last year (e.g. increasing trade settlements in national currencies within BRICS, non-USD settlements within the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)). The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is an organisation that has a number of new member countries that have signed up or are considering signing up for both political-economic and military cooperation (Lkhaajav, 2022). In the framework of bilateral and multilateral military cooperation in Asia, military exercises have been conducted with the participation of Russia (e.g. Vostok 2022). In multilateral cooperation outside the Western alliance, China's role is dominant, so the expansion of both the organisations and their activities strengthens China's geopolitical positions.

The global economic and political developments of the last year basically reflect the picture that the US has strengthened its economic position and political hegemony within the Western alliance, mainly at the expense of Europe. At the same time, on the multipolarity side, non-Western countries have been more and more reluctant to acknowledge US political hegemony and do not support the US narrative of sole responsibility for Russia, but have mostly adopted a neutral, wait-and-see, in some cases pro-Russia position (e.g. Iranian military equipment sales), while strengthening their economic and political relations with

each other against the US's economic and geopolitical interests. China is playing a key role in this process, politically reinforcing the viability of a balanced multipolar international cooperation system based on sovereign states by strengthening its relations with Russia and its central role in Asian multilateral organisations.

8. Unfolding of the Thucydides Trap

In the context of the geopolitical balance of power between China and the US, the Russian-Ukrainian war has led to a strengthening and a more pronounced separation of the economic and alliance and cooperation regimes of the two superpowers. On the economic side, the US has further strengthened the decoupling of the production chains and the relocation of critical production units within the alliance system (e.g. friend-shoring), and has taken direct action against China in the field of technological innovation, especially in the high-tech chip industry. As a result of these economic measures, the relative economic position of the US within the West has been strengthened, while its vulnerability to the non-West has been reduced. Achieving the full independence and separation of the West from the non-West may take years due to the deep global interdependence of production chains. On the political arena, the US has pushed the members of the Western alliance into an increasingly united front, on the European side along the lines of Russia's war in Ukraine and on the side of the Pacific allied countries along the conflict over Taiwan.

The Russia-Ukraine war is a more important geopolitical location for the US, but China cannot remain neutral in the situation. In the last year, the US has succeeded in strengthening its position in the West, and in making the third global pole (Europe with Russia) impossible for the long term. If the US succeeds in implementing its strategic plans for

Russia in the medium term – to weaken Moscow economically and politically, to facilitate its disintegration and to strengthen its influence in the West after the current power is removed – it would gain a substantial economic and strategic advantage in the geopolitical contest with China.

China was slow to react at the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war, partly because of the country's diplomatic tradition and partly because of the aftermath of COVID. At the same time, Beijing's wait-and-see approach may have been motivated by a desire to assess the global political leverage and capacity for action of the US in the early stages of the war. Once the lines of power (West and non-West) had been delineated, Beijing responded on the one hand by building on and expanding the international relations and cooperation schemes of previous years (BRICS, SCO) and by establishing new non-US dollar-based trade settlement agreements (OPEC). Within the non-West, China's role has been further strengthened over the past year through the reinforcement and expansion of previously established multilateral organisations' cooperation.

Following the provocative US diplomatic action in Taiwan, Beijing has become increasingly assertive in its support for Russia, both politically and economically. China cannot allow Russia to be defeated in the Russo-Ukrainian war and be on the verge of disintegration, given US strategic objectives, while at the same time Russia's relative weakening and increased dependence on China is beneficial for Beijing politically, economically and militarily. Russia and China's cooperation, despite fundamental differences, has never been as broad and deep as it is today. The combined economic, military and political power of Beijing and Moscow, complemented by Asia-based multilateral cooperation schemes, can successfully compete geopolitically with the West in the medium and long term.

The Russian-Ukrainian war can be assessed as a prelude to the Thucydides trap, which has so far brought about a tightening of the two superpowers' systems of cooperation and alliances and an increasingly decisive separation of them from each other. The Russian-Ukrainian war is expected to become a protracted or frozen conflict, as the economic-political separation measures and bloc-building processes that have been initiated will take more time to be completed.

Notes

- * Szilárd Boros is a Ph.D. candidate at The Doctoral School of Earth Sciences, Faculty of Sciences, University of Pécs, Hungary. <Email: boros.szilard@hepa.hu>
1. China: People's Republic of China.
 2. *Asia Power Index*. (Sydney: Lowy Institute.) <<https://power.lowyinstitute.org/>>
 3. Major countries and geographic entities within the West: EU, Japan, South Korea and the Anglo-Saxon countries (Great Britain, Canada, Australia)
 4. U.S. Department of State. *The Summit for Democracy*. <<https://www.state.gov/summit-for-democracy/>>
 5. Empire of Rome strategy was the “divide et impera”.
 6. George Friedman's *Flashpoints: The emerging crisis in Europe* book release press conference at The Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2015). <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IuIoB--Al-I>>
 7. フジニュースネットワーク (*Fuji News Network (FNN)*) (7th April 2022). 【独自】ペロシ米下院議長が台湾訪問へ 現職下院議長の訪台は25年ぶり [Exclusive: U.S. House Speaker Pelosi to visit Taiwan – first visit by an incumbent House Speaker in 25 years] <<https://www.fnn.jp/articles/-/343494>>; *The Washington Post* (2nd August 2022, Opinion): Nancy Pelosi: Why I'm leading a congressional delegation to Taiwan

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/08/02/nancy-pelosi-taiwan-visit-op-ed/>.

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