

Chinese Strategic Relations and *Diplomatization* in the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict: Securitizing Geopolitical and Economic Interests

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Abstract

Since Ukraine's secession from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and subsequent declaration of its independence more than three decades ago, Russia's stance toward the former Soviet republic has always been one of non-recognition, territorial encroachment, political intervention, and a policy of low-intensity conflict. The Russian military actions in Ukraine have become the most serious conflict in Europe after the Second World War. The crisis in Ukraine further presented a significant strategic challenge to the Chinese leadership in global politics. The international community has likewise turned to the Chinese doorstep as many perceived its behavior as the reflection of what they

call the “China’s dilemma” in the on-going crisis. Within this premise, this paper looks into China’s strategic *diplomatization* in securitizing and balancing its geopolitical and economic interests.

Keywords: *Russia-Ukraine conflict, Chinese diplomacy, Chinese foreign relations, Ukraine crisis*

1. Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine presented a significant strategic challenge to the Chinese leadership in global politics. The conflict likewise raised the concerns for Chinese companies as they face some problems with the European Union (EU) market (Thomas, 2022). The EU is a significance Chinese trade partner. Thus, China’s position regarding the ongoing crisis has also had implications within and beyond the EU. While the Sino-Russia relationship had significantly improved since 2014 when Russia faced sanctions from the West due to the annexation of Crimea, the on-going Ukraine crisis has put a challenge to Beijing on how it will improve the EU-China relations which had already faced challenges in the last couple of years. It is equally important to note, at the same time, that Ukraine is an essential partner of China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Ukraine provides China with a gateway to Europe. Moreover, there exists a longstanding military, space, and technological cooperation between China and Ukraine. Hence, this paper attempted to examine China’s behavior toward the Russia-Ukraine Crisis.

China is trying to square the impossible circle through *diplomatization* campaigns. Although Beijing appears to be extending firm diplomatic support to Russia in its ongoing “conflict” with Ukraine, Beijing appears unwilling to back Moscow in a whole-hearted manner.

As such, through process tracing and systematic review of literatures, this paper: (1) revisits the nature and progression of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict; (2) examines the Sino-Russian politico-economic relations and to what significant extent this relationship lasts to keep securitizing China's economic interest; (3) analyzes the interest of China in Ukraine as integral region, linking Asia to Europe, for the BRI; and (4) attempts to explain Chinese stances in the ongoing crisis, as what the world describes, the "China's Dilemma." This paper ends at discussing how China, by calculating the balance between its geopolitical and economic stances, can protect its politico-economic interests.

2. Revisiting the Nature of the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

Since Ukraine's secession from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and subsequent declaration of its independence more than three decades ago (upon the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991), Russia's stance toward the former Soviet republic has always been one of non-recognition, territorial encroachment, political intervention, and, up until the February 2022 invasion, a policy of low-intensity conflict through Russian-backed separatist groups in the Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk) region of eastern Ukraine (Mankoff, 2022; Kuzio, 2016; Greenspan, 2022). Attitudes toward Russian intervention, and questions on Ukrainian sovereignty and the strengthening of ties with the West have likewise been the focal point of contentions in Ukrainian national politics (Shulman, 2004; Kiryukhin, 2015), as manifested in the Orange Revolution of 2004 which saw the victory of the pro-West candidate Viktor Yushchenko; the bid for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership in 2008 which was sidelined by a pro-Russian administration in 2010; and the Maidan protests (Revolution of Dignity) of 2013-14 that ousted pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, after

his sudden refusal to sign a political association and free-trade agreement with the EU (Myshlovska, 2022; Greenspan, 2022; Mankoff, 2022).

The events of 2013-14 which saw an upsurge of Ukrainian nationalism and opposition toward Russian intervention elicited Russian response with the annexation of Crimea and the backing of a separatist revolt in the Donbas region which has a predominantly Russian-speaking population (Myshlovska, 2022; Greenspan, 2022; Mankoff, 2022). While these events in recent history, which are linked to the present security environment of Eastern Europe (involving Russia and NATO), may be seen as the proximate causes leading to the 2022 invasion, the justifications to these actions that are amplified in Russian media and propaganda are drawn from a much earlier history of the region – narratives which are rooted in debates on Russian and Ukrainian historiography and discourses on national identification.

A day before the announcement of a military operation into Ukrainian territory which premeditated the February 24th invasion, President Vladimir Putin had already given a speech outlining the list of justifications for Russian aggression (Mankoff, 2022). Although the earlier mentioned proximate factors such as the clamor against NATO's growing influence in Central and Eastern Europe was amongst the main reasons pointed out by the Russian President, the historicity and legitimacy of the state of Ukraine was once again put into question (Mankoff, 2022; Greenspan, 2022). Putin, as with his predecessor, Dimytri Medvedev, have always scrutinized Ukrainian (and Belarusian) statehood, citing it as an “anti-Russian” ploy by Western powers – an attempt to further isolate Russia in the region (Mankoff, 2022; Kuzio, 2016; Alexeeva and Lasserre, 2018). This springs from the Russian nationalist and Pan-Slavic narratives that assert the historic “one-ness” of Russia, Ukraine (which Russian nationalists refer to as “Little

Russia”), and Belarus (referred to as “White Russia”), which are hinge on the cultural similarities of an imagined *odyn narod* (“one people”) in the form of a shared (Eastern) Slavic heritage and an Eastern Orthodox faith, as well as, and most importantly, historical roots with the glorious Kievan Rus, a loose federation of Slavic, Finic, and Norse principalities in Eastern Europe that thrived from the 9th and 11th centuries (Roberts and Westad, 2013; Engelmann *et al.*, 2009; Greenspan, 2022; Kuzio, 2016).

Though the areas that now encompass present-day Ukraine and south-eastern Russia have been inhabited since the 8th century by Slavic tribes practicing swidden agriculture, it was the Scandinavian raiders (Norsemen) who subsequently became their overlords and established the early principalities of Kiev and Novgorod (Roberts and Westad, 2013). After the reign of the legendary Vangarian prince Rurik, whose existence is debated by historians, the riverine federation of Rus was founded, with united Kiev and Novgorod as its central principalities (Roberts and Westad, 2013; Greenspan, 2022; Engelmann *et al.*, 2009). The Kievan Rus, which centered on Kiev, occupied present-day Ukraine, Belarus, and portions of eastern Russia (Greenspan, 2022), and is considered by both contemporary Russian and Ukrainian nationalist historians as the historical roots of their respective nations (Mankoff, 2022; Kiryukhin, 2015; Ploky, 1995). By the 10th century, another layer to what the historian Zenon Kohut referred to as the “unity paradigm” (Mankoff, 2022) of the dominant Russian nationalist narrative was added – the conversion of prince Vladimir the Great and the whole Kievan Rus into Orthodox Christianity (Roberts and Westad, 2013). By this period, the Kievan Rus was at its peak, being an important trading center in Western Europe that traded goods from West Asia (Middle East) with sought-after Russian furs and beeswax (*ibid.*). However, by the 11th century, Kiev’s dominance had waned, followed

by the rise of the northern principality of Muscovy, from which, after the brief interlude of Mongolian overlordship (in the form of the Golden Horde) from the 13th to mid-15th centuries, the later modern Russian empire would take root (Roberts and Westad, 2013; Engelmann *et al.*, 2009).

While Russian national history would trace its origin from the Kievan Rus, as with Ukrainian history, it clearly proceeds with the rise of Muscovy, thereby leaving behind Kiev as a mere appendage to the larger Russian nation that was in the making. From there it proceeds to its independence from the Golden Horde by the 15th century; the adoption of the title “tsar” by Muscovy rulers after the fall of Constantinople in 1453; the expansion of Russia under Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible) in the 16th century; the reign of Peter I who develops Russia into one of the leading imperial powers by early 18th century; further expansion into Crimea and the russification of Ukraine under Catherine the Great; the restoration of order with the Romanov dynasty until 1917; and finally the 1917 October Revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922 until its dissolution in 1991 (Roberts and Westad, 2013; Engelmann *et al.*, 2009; Greenspan, 2022). On the other hand, Ukrainian nationalist historians assert the continuity of Kievan Rus, with the Halych-Volhynian principality as its true heir, distancing itself (Ukrainian national history) from the narratives that place primacy on Muscovy (Plokhly, 1995). Despite being made part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania by 1363, and divided between Russia and Poland-Lithuania in 1667, until the late 18th century when majority of present-day Ukraine was fully incorporated into the Russian Empire after the dissolution of Poland-Lithuania, Ukrainian nationalists point out to numerous occasions of resistance in the region as an assertion of early Ukrainian identity and agency (Greenspan, 2022; Plokhly, 1995; Subtelny, 1980).

Central to this narrative of struggle is the Cossack era of Ukraine. The Cossacks of Ukraine and southern Russia and their resistance to both Poland-Lithuania and the Russian Empire is a source of ethnic pride among modern Ukrainian nationalists, as though Russian historians would point out the 1654 Treaty of Pereyaslav as proof of Russian sovereignty over the Hetmanate (the political organization of the Ukrainian Cossacks), their Ukrainian counterparts argue that the autonomy and self-governing nature of the Hetmanate was as an early form of Ukrainian ethnic identity, a historical basis for modern Ukrainian nationalism (Plokyh, 1995; Subtelny, 1980). That even while under the Russian Empire, the repression of the Ukrainian intelligentsia and the ban on the publication of literary works in the Ukrainian language in the 19th century is added proof, for contemporary Ukrainian nationalists, of the early awakening of their national consciousness (Greenspan, 2022; Kiryukhin, 2015; Guthier, 1979). Furthermore, taking advantage of the fall of the Romanov dynasty in 1917, the Ukrainian intelligentsia formed the Central Rada, a council of elected delegates, and moved to proclaim Ukraine as a state within Russia before declaring full independence by 1918 (Greenspan, 2022; Guthier, 1979). The brief period of Ukrainian independence ended with its incorporation into the Soviet Union by 1922 (Engelmann *et al.*, 2009; Greenspan, 2022; Simon, 2002).

It is therefore the nationalist history of Russia which is hinged on the legacy of Empire and Unionism which shapes its current view on Ukrainian statehood. The Eurasian and Pan-Slavic undertones of modern Russian nationalism which is combined with the nostalgia of the Soviet Union places the history of Ukraine as part and parcel of the larger history (and aspirations) of the East-Slavic peoples (understood as being comprised of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians). Hence, the

dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of Ukraine is seen by Putin as a brief stall in the history and destiny of this *odyn narod*, a history which must be continued with Russia at its helm (Kuzio, 2016). Added to this imagined history and a nostalgia which is reified in Russian intellectual circles is the disdain over the growing US and Western European hegemony over Eastern Europe which was once under Russia's sphere of influence.

Russian justification for the invasion is expressed in the pursuance of this national (Pan-Slavic) project and a necessity of reasserting itself in the region in the face of NATO expansion. This line of thought is congruent with Russia's interest in curbing the dominance of the United States (US) and the EU, a trajectory toward a supposedly (as Russian media professes) more multipolar system. This view on the West (particularly the US) and on multipolarity is shared by the People's Republic of China (PRC), another world power whose relations with Russia has been regarded as a determinant factor in the stability of both the Eurasian and Asia-Pacific regions (Bolt, 2014; Ozawa, 2019). Present Sino-Russian relations, as will be discussed below, have been characterized by both rapprochement, tensions, and dilemmas springing from Russia's policies in Central Asia and, most importantly in this context, Eastern Europe – with the ongoing war of aggression in Ukraine.

3. Sino-Russian Political Relations and Economic Ties

Russia has a long history of contact with China, which was officially established in the seventeenth century with the first Russian diplomatic missions to Beijing (Bolt, 2014). In the 1860s, the two countries became next-door neighbors when the territories of eastern Siberia, nowadays known as the Russian Far East, became part of the Russian Empire

(*ibid.*). After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, China's ruling Communist Party moved swiftly to normalize relations with its communist neighbor (Chase *et al.*, 2017). Throughout the early 1950s the two countries enjoyed the strong ties founded on the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, a bilateral treaty which established a security alliance and facilitated significant economic, military, technological aid and cooperation (Radin *et al.*, 2021).

But this relationship began to experience a serious downturn in the mid-1950s when an ideological rift emerged between Beijing and Moscow upon the assumption of Nikita Khrushchev to the Soviet leadership (Ferdinand, 2016). The questions of the demarcation of the Sino-Russian border, the joint exploitation of the region's natural resources and the management of migrant flows from China have been at the heart of disputes between the two countries (Chase *et al.*, 2017).

Tensions escalated which saw the two countries engaged in an open hostility that eventually resulted in the Sino-Soviet split. Although the prevailing narrative behind the rift is understood to be ideological in nature, as marked by Beijing's negative reaction in 1956 toward the denouncement of Stalinist policies by Soviet premier Khrushchev, other historians also point out the divergent national interests of the two Communist powers as grounds for the souring of relations (Radchenko, 2010). Aside from the evident discomfort of the Soviet Union over the growing influence and clout of Communist China over the Communist world – having been the model for numerous Communist and anti-Imperialist movements throughout the former colonies in the East – the Soviet Union had also been adamant in their sharing of missile and nuclear technology which, by 1960, had resulted to the pulling-out of Russian specialists from China (McDougall, 1999). Added to this was the inaction of the Soviet Union and their failure to support China in

their conflicts with Taiwan and a border war with India from 1958-59 (*ibid.*). The rift between the two countries subsequently led to the normalization of relations by China with the US to balance against the perceived Soviet threat (Radin *et al.*, 2021). The fall of the USSR and the gradual settling of border disputes in the 1990s however have restored and normalized political and economic relations between Russia and China and contributed to the rapid development of Sino-Russian relations (Gabuev, 2016a).

The considerable increase in economic trade between the two countries since the beginning of the 2000s reflects the development of the growing importance of China for Russia and in international trade. In the period up until 2015, Sino-Russian bilateral trade steadily increased despite the economic crisis of 2008, the effects of which proved temporary (Gabuev, 2016b). In 2009, Sino-Russian trade fell by 31.7 percent, but the following year the volume of trade regained its pre-crisis level (Huang and Lassare, 2017). However, in 2015, bilateral trade was once again in free fall as a result of the global economic downturn and the significant fall in energy prices (*ibid.*). In 2017, Sino-Russian trade relations nevertheless rebounded, driven by the sale of arms and Russian military technologies and the intensification of exports of Russian oil and natural gas to their Chinese neighbor (Lukin, 2018).

The volume of Sino-Russian trade has grown nine-fold, reaching US\$95.3 billion in 2014, a record figure. In 2017, China was Russia's leading trade partner for the eighth consecutive year, with a volume of trade reaching US\$84.07 billion, an increase of 20.8 percent compared to the previous year (Xinhua, 2nd July 2017). Until 2006, in fact, this growth in trade was mainly the result of the increase in Russian exports to China, which made Russia maintain a trade surplus in its relations with the PRC (Alexeeva and Lasserre, 2018). Nonetheless, imports from China rapidly increased, stimulated by the need for everyday consumer

products in the Russian Far East and Siberia (*ibid.*). This explains how, taken overall, the trade balance has remained in favor of the PRC since 2007. China is also a huge buyer of timber from Russia's Far East, with imports of timber and related products worth US\$4.1 billion in 2010s. In the other direction, China sells mechanical products, machinery and transport equipment, mobile phones, cars, and consumer products to Russia. Chinese exports to Russia stood at US\$67.6 billion in 2021, up 34 percent with this likely to be a growth market as Russia replaces previously EU sourced products with those from China and Asia (Radin *et al.*, 2021).

As a result of the growth in trade between the Chinese and Russian border areas since the 2000s, the geographical and economic interrelationship between the Russian Far East and North-East China became more marked. The economic activities of the Chinese in Russia also became more diversified: to retail trade was added construction, agriculture, and tourism as well as the exploration of the region's natural resources. Moreover, different Russian provinces exhibit vastly different degrees of trade dependence on China (Lee, 2013). In search for fresh economic opportunities, China has focused on bolstering trade and economic development (Maizland, 2022). The approach enabled Chinese entrepreneurs to venture farther and gradually extending their trade networks westward. This growing interrelationship of the border regions is often highlighted with a great deal as Moscow believes that closer integration with China will advance its geopolitical and economic objectives (Lee, 2013). Overtime, this become a natural process of regional integration, which has since been described as a symbol of good relations between the two countries.

When sanctions were imposed in 2014 after Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea, bilateral trade has expanded by more than 50 percent and China has become Russia's biggest export destination. The two were

aiming to boost total trade to US\$200 billion by 2024. Russia is China's second-biggest oil supplier after Saudi Arabia, with volumes averaging 1.59 million barrels per day last year, or 15.5 percent of Chinese imports. About 40 percent of supplies flow via the 4,070-km (2,540-mile) East Siberia Pacific Ocean (ESPO) pipeline that was financed by US\$50 billion in Chinese loans. Russia is also Beijing's third gas supplier, exporting 16.5 billion cubic meters (bcm) of the fuel to China in 2021, meeting about 5 percent of Chinese demand (*China Briefing*, 14th April 2022).

Western sanctions pushed Russia to look toward China for investment opportunities in recent years. As a result, Chinese state banks have helped Russia finance everything from infrastructure to oil and gas projects under China's BRI. Russia is by far Beijing's largest recipient of state sector financing, securing 107 loans and export credits worth US\$125 billion from Chinese state institutions between 2000 and 2017 (*ibid.*). The continuous crisis between Russia and Ukraine has drawn the former closer to its communist neighbor. There are trade agreements that are yet to be implemented which aims to speed up the Sino-Russian bilateral trade amidst the ongoing tensions in Ukraine at present. As sanctions against Russia mount, China could offset some of its neighbor's pain by buying more but would also be wary of running afoul of potential sanctions.

4. Examining Chinese Interests in Ukraine

As the world monitors Russia's military build-up on the Ukrainian border, the actions of China, Russia's strategic partner, are worth to be re-examined. Since the independence of Ukraine over the past three decades, the country's natural resources, defense industry, and location have formed a growing share of China's strategic interests. Throughout

this period, the economic importance of Ukraine for strategic partnership in the eyes of China has been evident. Since 2020, China has been Ukraine's leading trading partner thereby considering Ukraine as a critical gateway for its BRI ambitions. Ukraine is also a major arms supplier for China, second only to Russia, and China is the largest buyer of Ukrainian arms (Liu, 2022).

Ukraine's free trade agreement with the EU makes it an attractive transit point for Chinese goods, especially in light of growing European hesitancy toward trade relations with China. Infrastructure and energy have also been major points of emphasis (Jiang, 2022). In 2016, COFCO Group, China's largest agricultural conglomerate, built a US\$75 million grain and oil transfer terminal at the Mykolaiv port on the Black Sea (Girard, 2022). In 2017, Chinese engineers finished upgrading Ukraine's busiest international port, the Yuzhny port near Odessa (Ciurtin, 2022). That same year, two Chinese firms won the contract to build a fourth subway line in Kyiv, with a provision to raise funds for the \$1.3 billion project from Chinese financial institutions. However, on a few strategic items in energy, agriculture, and mining products, China relies heavily on Russia and Ukraine (Jiang, 2022). Soon after the war broke out, the Chinese leadership reportedly instructed its National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) to encourage state-owned enterprises to search alternative sources of imports of grains, iron ore, and energy to make up for the potential drop in supplies from the two countries in conflict (Girard, 2022).

China's BRI, moreover, has considered Ukraine as an integral part for its agenda to take off (Jiang, 2022). Ukraine joined BRI in 2017, seeking to leverage its relationship with China to accelerate its transport modernization, especially for railways and roads. Ukrainian policymakers have also sought to position the country as a gateway for China's access to Europe (Poita, 2022). The two countries have so far

signed BRI-related construction contracts worth nearly three billion dollars in sectors such as transportation and energy, and China has used BRI leverage to influence Ukraine's position on disputed issues (Jennings, 2022). In June 2021, Beijing and Kyiv signed a broad deal on infrastructure days after Ukraine withdrew from a joint statement signed by more than forty countries that called for an independent investigation into human rights abuses in China's Xinjiang region (Ciurtin, 2022).

China's relations with Ukraine, which have been established for decades now, is challenged due to Russian military actions within the Ukrainian territories. In the midst of the Russia-Ukraine Crisis, as in the Libyan civil war, China's response to war was earlier viewed to be likely limited solely to evacuating Chinese citizens, suspending ongoing projects, and eventually having Chinese companies absorb the loss of assets (Ciurtin, 2022). Beijing evacuated nearly thirty-six thousand Chinese nationals during the Libya crisis; evacuating the roughly six thousand Chinese citizens in Ukraine would likely be less challenging (Liu, 2022). While China is unlikely to condemn it, this dynamic could be driving its openness to facilitating cease-fire negotiations (Ciurtin, 2022).

Faced with this situation, Ukraine gradually shifted towards a model of cooperation with China. Following the approach of most European countries, China is both an important economic and technological partner and a rival, sometimes even a threat (Poita, 2022). While Ukraine drew several "red lines" in its cooperation with China and left the trade and investment sphere open, it has prevented China to have access on its critical infrastructure and sensitive sectors of the economy. Here, China is still an important trading partner for Ukraine, a possible source of financing for investment projects, but from a political point of view, relations with China are significantly limited (*ibid.*).

Nonetheless, the scale and intensity of the current Russia-Ukraine war has deeply challenged this tenet of Chinese foreign policy. Outright political assistance to Russia in its actions toward an independent and sovereign state would make Beijing an accomplice in Moscow's invasion, triggering reprisals from the international community (including key BRI partners) and, thus, negatively impacting business. On the other hand, a circumstantial decoupling from Russia would lead to the deliberate estrangement of a vital BRI partner, cause troubles in Central Asia, and precipitate difficulties in ensuring a steady and affordable energy supply (Ciurtin, 2022).

5. China's *Diplomatization* over Russian-Ukraine Crisis

The Russian military actions in Ukraine have become the most serious conflict in Europe after the Second World War. The war provoked diverse reactions. The international community has likewise turned into the Chinese doorstep as many perceived its behavior as the reflection of what they call the "China's dilemma" in the on-going conflict. Though China's behavior largely appears ambiguous in the eyes of the many in the international community, China's reaction to the ongoing war in Ukraine is often calling for both sides to talk (Pekar, 2022). Beijing has been consistent in calling for dialogue and negotiation between Kyiv and Moscow and emphasized its interest in promoting a peaceful solution, and respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity (Su and Yuan, 2022). The lingering question among observers in global politics revolves on what are China's intentions and where it is leading to with its behavior.

Although not siding with the Kremlin publicly, and as other world leaders were putting economic pressure on Russia, President Xi Jinping did not point fingers at or apply pressure to Russia during this Ukraine crisis. The Western-led sanctions over Russia resulted in a food crisis

and rising energy prices (Fabbri, 2022). With this situation, Xi's noncommittal stand was appreciated by President Putin (Ding, 2014). Addressing the Russian parliament on March 18th, as reported by BBC (19th March 2014), Putin said, "We are grateful to the people of China, whose leadership sees the situation in Crimea in all its historical and political integrity." Later, on 14 April 2022, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Burns called Chinese President Xi Jinping "a silent partner in Putin's aggression in Ukraine" and also noted China's threatening behavior in this renewed "Russian aggression against Ukraine" as well as the "longer term problem posed by China's ambitious leadership", calling it "the single most important geopolitical challenge" of the 21st century (*Global Atlanta*, 15th April 2022).

The principles of sovereignty have been sacrosanct for Beijing in international relations. These principles include sovereign equality, territorial integrity, and political independence. After the Cold war, the PRC remained uncompromising to these principles, especially in matters related to its interests over territorial disputes. Beijing insists that the solution to the conflict is to accommodate the "reasonable security concerns of the parties involved" (Le Corre, 2022). This follows China's position on issues related to territorial claims where it is a party of interest. Beijing asserts its opposition to any international intervention (Ding, 2014). This principle was echoed by China's Ambassador to the US, Qin Gang. Li Keqiang also re-emphasized this in a statement during the 27th Regular Meeting with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin last 5 December 2022. Li said that, "China and Russia enjoy traditional friendship and have always developed bilateral relations based on the principle of non-alliance, non-confrontation and non-targeting of any third party" (MFA, PRC, 7th December 2022). Qin, likewise dismissed claims about China's prior knowledge of Russia's military action or China providing military aid to Russia as

disinformation. However, until now, China has not tried to circumvent Western economic sanctions toward Russia.

Beijing has been keen to pursue a nuanced vision of functional multipolarity not only as a way of reducing the dominance of the US, but also to position its relations with Russia in a wider context. China's international policy trajectory is determined by keeping the balance between its conflicting geopolitical and economic interests (Pekar, 2022). Its strategic direction is bound to improve relations with the developing and established powers by keeping the balance among its complex stances as it advances its interests and principles in the process.

What appears to be the contradicting statements from Beijing toward the Ukraine crisis is primarily based on Kremlin's "reasonable security concerns". It is because of this idea that Beijing, until now, avoids to acknowledge Russian actions in Ukraine as an "invasion" (CNBC, 24th February 2022). Beijing's position, on this note, might be viewed to have extended firm diplomatic support to Russia in this ongoing conflict with Ukraine. However, it appears unwilling to back Moscow in a whole-hearted manner to avert the possible secondary sanctions from the West. From the economic standpoint, China is interested in deepening its cooperation with the West. It understands better that excessive strengthening of geopolitical influence threatens to weaken economic relations and vice versa. China's stance, in relation to its economic interests, is primarily at maintaining a balance and therefore the status quo. Hence, in an effort to stem growing suspicions over its ties with the Kremlin, PRC sent a delegation headed by Huo Yuzhen, China's special representative to China-Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation, to the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and, Poland (*Global Times*, 19th April 2022). The act is an attempt to rebuild its partially damaged relations in the region as many Central and Eastern European nations were disappointed

at Beijing's stance on the Ukraine situation (Fabbri, 2022).

Clearly, China does not want to spoil relations with the West while cautiously calculating that the influence of the West gets too strong. China has said that it would continue with "normal trade cooperation" with both Russia and Ukraine (Jiang, 2022). "China wants to preserve its ties with Moscow, abide by its principles and avoid harming relations with the US and the EU" (*The Washington Post*, 22nd February 2022).

The way in which China is resolving this dilemma in the Russian-Ukraine conflict, is typical to the traditional flexibility of Chinese diplomatic style. Thus China, on the one hand, is not voicing direct support and approval of the Russian special operation, demonstrating its neutrality and independence between Moscow and Kyiv (Kiev).

Ukraine's problem is that Sino-Ukrainian relations are not something well-defined and valuable for China (Pekar, 2022). Ukraine's policy toward China has been uncertain and vague for many years. However, China's economic interests are deeply now tied to the West – and even with Ukraine. China became EU's important trading partner in 2021 (BBC, 17th February 2021). China traded goods worth €696 billion (imports and exports). This represents 16 percent of all EU trade in goods while the share of the US amounted to approximately 15 percent (Destatis, n.d.) and overtook Russia in 2019 to become Ukraine's biggest single trading partner (*bne IntelliNews*, 29th October 2019). Accordingly, though in recent years, the relationship between Beijing and Moscow has become closer due to some shared interests, experts say that the partnership is far from unconditional, as China shows itself reluctant to profess unequivocal support for Russia (*France 24*, 1st March 2022). As Russia begins to feel the pain of widespread global sanctions meant to cripple its ability to finance war, it may turn to China for help in blunting their impact. However, China has, so far, shown no signs of helping Russia evade Western sanctions given the

risks in accessing the Western markets – its major trade partners. Beijing's behavior appears to be that it does not want to promote Moscow's victory, but will be less likely to allow its collapse (Pekar, 2022). Here, from a geopolitical standpoint, China's position is built on its interest to establish greater influence and weight in international affairs by supplanting the West.

6. China's Diplomatic Calculus: On Balancing and Securitizing the Chinese Interests

China's sphere of influence and economic power has been consistently felt in the international system in recent years. It was able to establish important links in the world's critical supply chains. Beijing's *diplomatisation* of the current Ukraine crisis, therefore, has significant implications not only for Russia-China relations but also for global politics and economics. For instance, the EU is a significant Chinese trade partner. Moreover, While, the Russia-China relationship has significantly improved since 2014, Ukraine is an essential partner of China's ambitious BRI and provides Beijing with a gateway to Europe. China also has longstanding military, space, and technological cooperation with Ukraine.

The conflict between the West and Russia due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine remained a major concern in international politics beyond 2022. China's diplomatic stances and reactions are influenced by the interplay among major powers and global politics (Zhao and Yu, 2022). US and EU have a great stake in China's economic and foreign policy. To deeply understand China's behavior in this crisis one should carefully examine its security outlook. The Chinese global security outlook is firmly anchored in its national security concept. If one would review the relationality of Chinese worldview, the *diplomatisation*

which China practices now will be studied more and understood better” (Neumann, 2020: 18). China’s leaders are fully aware that any support to Russia over Ukraine would aggravate relations with the EU and the US. Chinese strategists view Russia, the US, and Europe as the most important determinants of the global balance of power (Blanchette and Lin, 2022). To securitize its political and economic interests, China is closely watching the level and intensity of sanctions from the Western world toward Russia. Xi and his economic managers are calculating the situation so they can protect the Chinese economy. Despite the significant drop on China’s image in greater Europe, PRC certainly does not welcome instability and economic turmoil (Le Corre, 2022). China understands well that declaring its full support to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine will incur more losses than benefits to its rising economy and political influence (Matsuda, 2022).

The Sino-Russian relations is often described as the alliance of two ideologically complementary authoritarian regimes (Yang, 2022). However, separated by their distinct interests. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China is observing closely while contemplating how best to maximize its interests by playing both ends against the middle (*ibid.*). It sees its economic ties with the West as more profitable than its links to Russia.

The present scenario would unlikely push Beijing to sacrifice China’s interests and undertake a challenging role by being deeply involved with Russia in Ukraine regardless of any possible outcome. The only Russian goods with a particular appeal for China are weapons. Moreover, it is important to note that Ukraine was an important country to Xi’s BRI (Matsuda, 2022). Hence, if China manages to play its cards well and turn the West to be less assertive in their approach Beijing, it could continue to craft this pseudo-neutral image where it can keep trading with all the involved stakeholders (Noboa, 2022).

All the intertwined internal and external conditions discussed in this paper are pushing and pulling China's diplomatic stances, tactical positioning, and strategic choices in securitizing its geopolitical and economic interests in this crisis. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi highlighted that China is committed to its "ever-lasting friendship and mutually beneficial cooperation" with Russia. This according to Wang is founded on the "clear logic of history". However, Wang also mentioned that China believes it must "respect and protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries" (Palacio, 2022). Still, it is believed that Beijing has some flexibility to maneuver its strategic stances and *diplomatisation*. However, those stances should be grounded on overcoming the challenges of meeting the Chinese interests and principles, both rhetorically and substantively (Zhao and Yu, 2022).

Examining the statement from Beijing promising that it does not deliberately circumventing sanctions on Russia and that Chinese state banks also conformed to financial sanctions on Russia, and restricted financing for purchasing Russian commodities, suggest that China's objective is not to support the Russian war effort. Instead, Beijing is using the Russia-Ukraine war to address its own strategic concerns and geopolitical challenges (Li, 2022).

Yang (2022) also agrees that in the foreseeable future, China is poised to benefit from tensions between Western capitals and Moscow. As Russia's relations with the West get worsen, the imposition of Western-led sanctions will likely to further push Moscow into Beijing's orbit and allow the latter greater leverage and influence in the Sino-Russian relationship (*ibid.*). This positions China to securitize its politico-economic interests. Looking into the current direction of Sino-Russian relations, Chinese economic strategists are more likely well-prepared on what measures to take in response to Russia's search for economic assistance. However, in the long run, as Yang (2022)

projected, China will not move with Russia against the West, but will further distance itself from the Russian aggression toward Ukraine. With China closely observing the direction of the crises and the shattering of European peace, it keeps calculating how it can best maximize the Chinese interests by playing both ends against the middle.

7. Conclusions

This paper presented the factors by which China is carefully looking into in balancing and securitizing its geopolitical and economic interests. The strategic direction of its *diplomatization* in the on-going Russo-Ukraine crisis is bound to improve relations with the developing and established powers in the West by keeping the balance among its complex stances as it advances its interests and principles in the process. The discussions dealing with the complexity of the Chinese behavior zeroed-in in the idea that China does not want to spoil relations with the West while cautiously wants to preserve its ties with Moscow. Clearly, Beijing promises to abide by its principles, and to avoid expanding China's negative image in its relations with the US and the EU.

In the subsequent discussions, this paper also established that the principles of sovereignty have been sacrosanct for Beijing in international relations, even after the Cold war. The PRC remained uncompromising to these principles, especially in matters related to its interests over territorial disputes. However, when its core national interests and the foreign policy principles have tensions, indirect and ambiguous stances are more likely be observed in Chinese *diplomatization*.

Notes

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