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Understanding the 'China Factor' in the Russia-Ukraine War

Chris Alden, Mariia Zolkina and Lukas Fiala

Authors: Chris Alden, Mariia Zolkina and Lukas Fiala

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
School of Law, Old College, The University of Edinburgh
South Bridge, Edinburgh EH8 9YL

Tel. +44 (0)131 651 4566
Fax. +44 (0)131 650 2005
E-mail: peacerep@ed.ac.uk
PeaceRep.org
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/company/peacerep/

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PeaceRep's Ukraine programme is a multi-partner initiative that provides evidence, insight, academic research and policy analysis from Ukraine and the wider region to support Ukrainian sovereignty, territorial integrity and democ-racy in the face of the Russian invasion. PeaceRep's Ukraine programme is led by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) partnering with the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) in Ukraine, the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Germany, the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM) in Austria and Jagiellonian University in Poland. Through our collaboration with KSE we work closely with researchers, education-alists and civic activists in Ukraine to ensure that policy solutions are grounded in robust evidence and are calibrat-ed to support democratic outcomes.

About the authors:
Chris Alden is Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Director of LSE IDEAS.

Mariia Zolkina is former Dinan Fellow at the Department of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), and an independent political analyst on Ukraine.

Lukas Fiala is project head of China Foresight at LSE IDEAS.

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Executive Summary

- Despite major risks, several bilateral opportunities with China are emerging, especially in light of recent US efforts to strike a political deal with Russia.
- Ukraine, possibly alongside European partners, could engage diplomatically with Beijing to pragmatically counterbalance the Russia-US dynamic, while recognising the limitations of this approach.
- China's strategic interests in Europe, such as using Ukraine as a buffer zone between Russia and the EU, pose challenges to this cooperation.
- Economic and trade cooperation, particularly in agriculture, is a potential area for collaboration, but Ukraine must apply a "security first" principle to evaluate any economic or infrastructure projects.
- China may play a role in Ukraine's future reconstruction, but Ukraine should implement strict and transparent eligibility criteria for participating actors.
- Currently, China's involvement in Ukraine's reconstruction is one of the least defined areas of mutual interest, largely because Ukraine prioritises offering reconstruction benefits to states that provide security guarantees.

Key Findings

China's post-1991 bilateral engagement with Ukraine focuses primarily on fostering economic ties, trade and agricultural interests, as well as strategic industries and military technology.

At the same time, China's policy on Ukraine needs to be situated as a part of broader and strategic framework for China's agenda in foreign policy. China has been steadily promoting the idea of reshaping the international system to allow for the realisation of the Beijing leadership's grand strategic ambitions.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, China's policy on Ukraine has tried to pursue two lines: on the one hand, the Chinese government aims to avoid conflation between Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a sovereign country and its own territorial politics, chief among them the unresolved Taiwan issue. On the other hand, while keen to maintain a strong relationship with Moscow, Beijing still wants to avoid the complete alienation of its Euro-Atlantic counterparts.

Ukraine-China relations are directly impacted by several, and to a certain extent conflicting, Chinese interests: its close relationship with Russia (a "partnership without limits") aimed at challenging US primacy; its efforts to develop a mutually beneficial relationship with Europe to encourage strategic autonomy on the part of the latter; and its exceptionalist stance towards the Global South, which upholds China's self-proclaimed status as the world's largest developing country.

Ukraine's perspective on China and its potential role in conflict resolution has changed significantly in the last five years. Since 2022, Ukraine's efforts to establish close political cooperation with China were based on exaggerated expectations that China would use its leverage over Russia to prevent Moscow from protracting the war. With incontrovertible evidence of financial, economic and military cooperation between China and Russia, Ukraine's hopes for China's constructive role in prospective negotiations and conflict resolution disappeared, shifting instead to public criticism of Beijing.

China's leverage in the so-called Global South directly impacts Ukraine's vision of conflict resolution and influences the dynamics of Kyiv-Beijing relations. By portraying itself as a third party aligned with the Global South, Beijing promotes narratives about the war that insulate its own position from criticism while appealing to the support of the "global majority" in the UN General Assembly.

Introduction

Since coming to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has utilised China's considerable economic position and overseas expansion to project power on the international stage. Determined to upend the established liberal international order, Chinese foreign and economic policy is challenging Western dominance in all economic spheres – from finance to high tech – in conjunction with territorial occupation in the South China Sea and the diplomatic mobilisation of the Global South in international fora. At the same time, its assertive policies have generated pushback from the US in the form of a debilitating trade war, the blocking of foreign direct investment (FDI) and technology transfers to China, and the strengthening of US alliance structures in Europe and Asia. All of this highlights the contradictions facing China as it seeks to assume global leadership and drive change in the international system.

Nowhere is this phenomenon and its contradictions more visible than in the case of China-Ukraine relations. China's interest in Ukraine's agricultural sector, strategic industries and infrastructure is evident well before 2014. Following the Motor Sich case and an increase in tensions between Kyiv and Beijing (once Ukraine refused to complete the deal), bilateral ties became even more complicated by China's claims to neutrality while providing significant support to Russia during its full-scale war from February 2022. Altogether, this bevy of contrary policies created a complex framework for present and future relations between the two countries.

The dynamics shaping China-Ukraine relations are poorly understood, yet will play a critical part in contemporary efforts to mediate the conflict. This includes the role of economic interests, the influence of the Beijing-Moscow diplomatic partnership, and the aspirations that China and Ukraine have for a post-war relationship.

The main research focus of this paper is China-Ukraine relations through the lens of contemporary efforts to mediate the conflict, China's broader approach towards international security as well as conflict resolution, influence of the Beijing-Moscow diplomatic partnership and the aspirations that China and Ukraine have for a post-war relationship. A fast moving subject, our report focuses on the period between 1991 to April 2025.

While examining this topic, the research team relied on various research methods: desk research, field research (in Ukraine), in-depth interviews with key informants (KII), and, partially, SWOT-analysis. Where possible, the researchers sought out informed practitioners and policy analysts in Kyiv and in Beijing, some of whom preferred to remain anonymous. The list of interviewees and their affiliations can be found in the Annex.

Ukraine-China Relations, 1991–2019

Legacy of Soviet Past on Ukraine-China Relations

The influence of a common communist heritage as part of the Soviet-led system, albeit one rejected by independent Ukraine and maintained if reformed under the Communist Party of China (CPC), continued to shape aspects of the contemporary relationship.

The question of Ukrainian sovereignty is bound up in the Soviet past and the tumultuous 20th century. While the breakup of the Tsarist empire coincided with the temporary emergence of an independent Ukrainian state, by 1921 Lenin's military forces were able to exert dominance over Kyiv and the Soviet Republic of Ukraine was integrated into the Soviet Union. The onset of Stalin's 'Holodomor' in Ukraine (1931–1932), like Mao's 'Great Famine' in China (1959–1961), owed its severity to the ruthless application of regime policies (Applebaum, 2020; Ditkotter, 2011). It was followed by Nazi Germany's invasion in June 1941 and four devastating years of warfare on Ukrainian soil. The Soviet Union's post-WWII diplomacy sought to offset Western power by arguing that Ukraine SSR and Belarus SSR should be recognised as sovereign states and take up permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council. Blocked by Western allies, Ukraine SSR and Belarus SSR were eventually recognised as member states in the General Assembly and thus became founding members of the UN. In that capacity, and despite being part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine SR's recognition in the UN helped lay a legal basis for independence.

The Ukrainian struggle to step out of the legacies of its authoritarian past started from its declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991 and the fragile establishment of multi-party democracy. In these first years, the key issues of territorial delineation between Ukraine and Russia were over the cities of Odesa, Sevastopol and the status of the Black Sea Fleet, with over 80% of the Black Sea Fleet placed in Russian hands in accordance with an agreement in 1997.

Equally concerning were the negotiations over Soviet nuclear weapons stationed in the country, with Kyiv holding 1,900 warheads, 176 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and 44 strategic bombers, making it the third largest nuclear power in the world at the time. Two years later, the last of the warheads had been given to Moscow in exchange for a set of security guarantees and promises of economic assistance from Russia (Arms Control Association, 2022; D'Anieri, 2023).

Struggles emerged between Ukrainian oligarchs, politicians and democratic activists over the control country's new political system, with Western-oriented politicians in conflict with Russian leaning counterparts. Beyond the impact on politics, the common Soviet heritage brought with it institutional familiarity between Ukraine and China and, in certain sectors, economic complementarities. Ukraine's position within the Soviet economy was that of an agricultural powerhouse whose infrastructure enabled it to cover the entire production cycle, from rich farmland, fertilizers, and cold storage, to transportation and exporting goods from Black Sea ports. It was also an industrial-scale producer of metallurgy (particularly steel) and chemicals, as well as a major energy supplier of coal, a host of rare earth elements, and a transit point for natural gas (Sutela, 2012). By 1996, after contracting by 22.7% since independence, the Ukrainian economy began to stabilise and in the early 2000s was starting to grow (Sutela, 2012). While this period spawned a clutch of oligarchs who dominated key sectors of the economy, it also saw the beginning of Ukraine as a truly internationalising economy, targeting export markets not only in the EU but also ex-Soviet republics, as well as further afield.

In addition to resources and basic manufacturing, Ukrainian high value-added export commodities included aircraft parts, helicopters, electrical machinery and pharmaceuticals. Both Ukraine and China were also initially dependent on military equipment supplied by Russia or developed in conjunction with the Soviet system, making arms sales an important component of two-way trade. This played a critical part in national security discussions within each country as to what kind of relationship they would have with the enervated Russian government and to what degree they would rely upon Moscow for military hardware. It also defined the parameters of shared interests in arms manufacturing and technology development.

For China, restricted from purchasing weaponry produced by the EU due to the arms embargo, Ukraine offered access to Soviet arms and technologies that Russia continued to be reluctant to provide. Kyiv, feeling no such qualms, was willing to sell licenses and technology 'not always following official channels' (Iwanski, 2012). Moreover, Kyiv was able to sell an unfinished Soviet aircraft carrier in 1998 for $20 million USD, which, renamed the Liaoning, became a part of the Chinese navy (PLAN) (Poita, 2021). The Ukrainians also sold the pre-production version of the Russian SU-33, which Chinese engineers were able to incorporate into the development of their own J-15 carrier-based fighter. Furthermore, after years of negotiations with Moscow, China turned to Kyiv and secured a $315 million agreement to sell four Zubr class hovercrafts to Beijing in 2009.

Ukraine-China Relations – New Beginnings, 2012–2019

In 2013, newly anointed Secretary-General of the CPC and President of China, Xi Jinping, launched an ambitious grand strategy called the 'Iron Silk Road' (eventually rebranded as the 'Belt and Road Initiative') that envisaged a revival of China's overland trading routes to European markets that led through Ukraine. Beijing believed that Ukraine could serve as China's gateway to EU markets—via the establishment of transit platforms ('dry ports') in the interior and through the country's Black Sea ports—as well as provide Chinese firms with access to the Mediterranean Sea. Chinese agri-businesses were particularly interested in the possibilities of investing in Ukrainian farmlands along with setting up food processing facilities. At the same time, a few Ukrainian companies began to set up joint ventures in China in manufacturing, electronics and new technologies aimed at exporting to Russia and Central Asia (Iwanski, 2012).

Complementing this initiative was the creation of a $4 billion credit line by China ExIm Bank for Ukraine, initially proposed to President Viktor Yushchenko during a state visit to Beijing in 2010 (Iwanski, 2012). It was aimed at underwriting the purchase of Ukrainian grain for the Chinese domestic market, a sector that had become an area of concern as global shortages in staples like rice and cooking oils drove food prices higher (Varfolomeyv, 2012). Like equivalent financing across Africa, Latin America and Central Asia, the primary aim was to support the massive infrastructure projects that formed the (now renamed) Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) such as the upgrading of Black Sea ports and the extension of the railway through Ukrainian territory.

China's President Hu Jintao's official visit to Crimea the next year was followed by a $85 million loan to upgrade a coal mine in Luhansk, part of a larger commitment to lend $1 billion to Ukraine's coal sector (Varfolomeyv, 2012). A further $3.7 billion financial commitment was made by the China Development Bank to replace Russian gas with Ukrainian coal, while a $2.4 billion currency swap to run over a three-year period was also agreed by the two leaders. According to one report, China was considered not only to be an alternative to reliance on Moscow or Brussels, but one which was able to contribute substantively to Ukraine's development.[1] Indeed, by 2011 China had become Ukraine's third largest trade partner after Russia and the EU, accounting for of 3.2% in Ukrainian exports and 7.5% of imports.

The rosy vision of closer Ukrainian-Chinese economic ties unfolding in 2012 was, however, premature. The eruption of the Euromaidan protests, which followed pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych's cancellation of Ukraine's commitment to sign an Association Agreement with the EU in late 2013, was met with a brutal crackdown that led to the deaths of over 100 activists. Faced with what increasingly looked like a massive revolutionary protest, Yanukovych fled to Moscow and a new interim government led by pro-Western figures stepped in. Beijing's unwillingness to recognise the interim government reflected in part their concerns about the spillover effect that this might have on China's own domestic politics, but it also led to the suspension of planned economic engagements. Within a few months, Russia's military campaign to occupy Crimea and part of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts in Ukraine tried to claim them as Russian sovereign territory. Kyiv's gradual military build-up in the years that followed, supported by Western training programmes and a modicum of economic sanctions against Moscow, meant that neither side was able to advance their military interests. The shooting down of a Malaysian passenger plane in 2014 by Russian forces demonstrated that the region was far from settled, becoming another "protracted conflict" in the aftermath of an unprovoked Russian invasion.

Despite these worsening security conditions, China continued to quietly pursue economic cooperation with Ukraine in key sectors. Bilateral trade in agriculture continued to expand as Ukrainians sold grain to the Asian giant while Chinese companies moved into the renewable energy sector as well as entering discussions with state-owned Energoatom to replace Russia's role in Ukraine's nuclear power plants (Varfolomeyev, 2018).

Despite the economic potential, Kyiv decided not to negotiate a free trade agreement with Beijing in 2015, following the signing of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) as an integral part of its Association Agreement with the EU in 2014. Periodic efforts by Chinese officials to revive discussions around an FTA ultimately failed to produce any results. In the meantime, a number of Chinese infrastructure projects stalled, while attention turned away from Russian-occupied Crimea to port rehabilitation projects in Mykolaiv and Odesa (Hurska, 2019).

Notably, efforts to expand bilateral cooperation in arms manufacturing continued. In the mid-2010s, Beijing and Kyiv entered into talks to open a manufacturing plant in Odesa to assemble Chinese Hongdu L-15 light attack aircrafts (a licensed copy of the Russian Yak-130) using Ukrainian AI-222-25F jet engines produced by Zaporizhzhya Motor-Sich plant (Daly, 2015). Some equity stakes in Motor Sich were put on the market and foreign interests, including Chinese, quickly snapped them up. By 2018, the Trump administration grew sufficiently concerned about reports that Kyiv was in discussions to sell a controlling stake in Motor Sich to Beijing Skyrizon Aviation, warning that such an arrangement could lead to a "debt trap" and the theft of sensitive technology (Hurska, 2019). Ukraine's security chief argued against the sale to the Chinese state-owned enterprise, suggesting that it would contribute to the weakening of Ukraine's own capacity in the high-tech defence armaments industry, and the purchase was blocked by a Ukrainian court in 2018 (Poita, 2021). Motor Sich was nationalised in 2021. With the manufacturing deal prevented and the shares purchases blocked, Chinese firms working with Ukrainian oligarch Oleksandr Yaroslavsky's DCH group subsequently took the matter to arbitration, suing the government for $3.5 billion.

China's Foreign Policy Strategy Post-20th Party Congress

Our understanding of China's role in the Russia-Ukraine war as well as its potential involvement in its settlement ought to be informed by a wider perspective of the strategic drivers of Chinese foreign and security policy since February 2022. In large parts, this period overlaps with Xi Jinping's third term as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which began at the 20th Party Congress in October of the same year, marking a critical juncture in the party-state's approach to foreign policy, economic security, the United States, and the Global South. From a bird's eye view, Beijing's strategic outlook in 2025 can be summarised according to the following key realisations:

- China is under siege from the United States in economic and security terms
- China's overarching strategic direction is correct, but the implementation of Xi Jinping's agenda needs improvement
- The wars in Ukraine and Gaza, as well as the second Trump presidency, herald a riskier and rapidly changing external environment
- In this context, China needs more influence, appeal and capacity to shape global affairs
- The Global South and Russia remain a source of support and strategic opportunity to offset China's worsening relationship with the US.

Considering the key developments since 2022 (explored in more detail below), two main conclusions can be drawn about the overall direction of China's grand strategy under Xi Jinping.

First, contrary to what some observers anticipated during China's strict zero-COVID policy, Beijing has not chosen to turn inwards. Instead, it is promoting a more assertive and—in its own terms—innovative agenda to refashion the international system in a way that is conducive to the realisation of the leadership's grand strategic ambitions.

Second, security has become more central to both domestic and foreign policy than during Xi Jinping's first and second terms, reflecting a newly adjusted ambition to balance development and security in the party-state's key planning documents. Taken together, these broad themes suggest the party-state's willingness to demonstrate China's status as a major power and stakeholder in global order, while leveraging potential openings to gain strategic and asymmetric advantage over the US. In this context, it is likely Beijing wants to have a seat at the table or at least a foot in the door of any potential post-war stabilisation or peace scenario.

China's Position on the War and Enduring Interests

Irrespective of the duration of the war, the CPC leadership holds a set of enduring interests vis-à-vis the conflict parties as well as the wider regional and global context. These interests can be split into realist and normative concerns affecting China's diplomatic relationships, its standing as a great power, and the normative architecture of global security governance in the medium- and long-term future.

On the one hand, the Chinese government is keen to avoid conflation between Russia's invasion of a sovereign, neighbouring country and its own territorial politics, chief among them the unresolved Taiwan issue. Based on conversations with Chinese government-affiliated think tank analysts over the past two years, it is clear the government is concerned about European and US observers establishing links between Ukraine and Taiwan. The underlying reason is Beijing's realisation that the war and its potential aftermath may well constitute a critical juncture in the development of the global security architecture. This would have ramifications for how countries perceive the legitimate use of force, the settlement of territorial disputes, and the role of plurilateral and multilateral frameworks, including international law in such resolution processes.

China's official state-media discourse has accordingly signalled to domestic audiences (in Chinese) the assertive stance the CPC leadership is taking in defending this core national interest. A representative source from *China Daily* speaks about this wider issue in the following way:

> "The Ukraine crisis (危机) and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (冲突) have made the situation in the respective regions extremely tense (极为紧张), with local populations enduring the flames of war (战火) under extreme duress, hoping for the termination of war to enjoy peace. However, the actions of the United States have been the complete opposite—not only failing to promote peace but instead intensifying conflicts, plunging countless civilians even deeper into the flames of war" (使无数平民陷入更深重的战火之中).
> "During this time of global turbulence (动荡), the United States should reflect on its external intervention policy (对外干预政策) and avoid sending wrong signals (错误信号) regarding the Taiwan Strait issue, to follow a path that led to failure in the past.

By linking war against Ukraine and resulting instability to US interventionism, this discourse delegitimates Western engagement in the region while framing the Taiwan issue as a matter of domestic politics. Any US involvement is thus construed as "external intervention" in Chinese domestic affairs, which would bring about similarly destabilising consequences as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. The use of the word "intervention" (干预 *ganyu*) is noteworthy as it speaks to a wider discussion in Chinese sources about the future of China's involvement in overseas conflicts and crisis management. Often contrasted with "interference" (干涉 *ganshe*), *ganyu* stands for what Chinese government rhetoric identifies as the destabilising consequences of US and allied military interventions (Sørensen, 2019). The usage of the phrase in the context of Taiwan and Ukraine reflects the ambition of divorcing China's approach—premised on non-interference as a guarantor of stability—from US and allied engagements across different regions.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the Chinese government therefore has a strong interest in promoting its own understanding of sovereignty and nationhood, while simultaneously carving out a space for Chinese security concerns. Given the importance of Russia's war in the re-ordering of European security as well as its polarisation of the discussion of global security issues within multilateral organisations such as the UN, the Chinese government is likely concerned that any potential settlement and the security norms it reinforces or weakens could have implications for a hypothetical settlement of the Taiwan issue.

Apart from these normative concerns, Chinese decision making about Russia's war on Ukraine has also been informed by three enduring realist interests.

The first is Xi Jinping's conviction to maintain a close relationship with Russia in the context of the shifting balance of power between the US and China. Anchored by Xi's close personal relationship with Vladimir Putin, Beijing's continued engagement of a beleaguered Moscow reflects Xi's understanding of Russia as a long-term partner to challenge US primacy and security commitments (Düben, 2022). In the words of one Chinese commentator:

> "In the next ten years, the US faces a life-or-death struggle for hegemony (霸权生死战), while China faces a battle of wisdom to achieve national rejuvenation (民族复兴智慧战). In this context, China's handling of its relationship with Russia represents a rational and proactive practice of international political strategy" (Tian, 2023).

Interpreted within the larger context, such assessments are grounded in the belief that China's relationship with Russia is an important part of a "global strategic balance" (全球战略平衡) (Hu, 2023). They are also informed by what Chinese policy analysts see as Russia's pivot to the East after relations with the collective West have fragmented, suggesting the bilateral relationship between Beijing and Moscow has become consolidated and future-oriented (Zhang, 2023). Exhibiting a tripolar understanding of the international balance of power, in the view of Chinese realists, Russia thus becomes a key partner for China in the pursuit of Xi's grand strategic ambition to achieve national rejuvenation and offset deteriorating relationships with the US and some of its allies.

Second, while the Chinese government has maintained a strong relationship with Moscow, it has simultaneously sought to avoid a complete alienation of its Euro-Atlantic counterparts. This aspect of China's rhetoric on the war has had two objectives. On the one hand, it has aimed to place a floor under its relationship with Washington, which by 2022–2023 had reached its lowest point since the end of the Cold War. On the other, Beijing has attempted to encourage European strategic autonomy to weaken transatlantic coordination through more autonomous European decision-making on the war, but also Chinese policy at large.

An example of this discourse has been chief diplomat Wang Yi's remarks at the 2022 and 2023 editions of the Munich Security Conference. Five days before the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion, Wang emphasised "the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries should be respected and safeguarded", citing the UN Charter and China's "principled" position in international affairs. Wang continued that China believes "it is imperative to return to the Minsk II agreement, the starting point of this matter, as quickly as possible" given its status as a binding document negotiated by the relevant parties and "endorsed by the UN Security Council." Wang further stipulated, "Ukraine should be a bridge for communication between the East and the West, not a frontier for confrontation between major powers", but also emphasised all parties are free to raise their own concerns, and Russia's reasonable security concerns should be respected and taken seriously (Wang, 2022). In 2023, Wang made similar remarks, arguing:

> "…the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries must be respected, disputes should be peacefully resolved through dialogue and consultation, the purposes and principles of the UN Charter should be upheld, and the key role of development must be fully harnessed" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [MFA], 2023a).

Remarks by senior Chinese leaders over the past two years demonstrate a careful balancing act between reassuring European governments of China's (self-perceived) constructive role in the context of the war, while maintaining a sufficient degree of generality through the appeal to universal principles to foster a level playing field for further exchanges in the region. Through this discursive strategy, Beijing has hoped to counter European views of China as merely a partner of Russia towards inculcating an understanding of China as a "principled" and responsible major power balancing close relationships with both sides.

A cautious approach recognising potential red lines surrounding support for Russia has also been an important feature of discussions among Chinese experts. Cautious undertones in Chinese analyses of the war and China's interests remained present throughout 2023 and 2024, reflecting a realist "China first" mentality (Eder, 2024). While heterogeneous, this set of worldviews carefully weighs the benefits and risks of Chinese engagement, despite the aforementioned importance of Russia as a key geostrategic partner. Already in 2022, for instance, Chen Dongxiao (陈东晓), President of Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, recognised the war's negative impact in exacerbating "mutual suspicion and hostility between China and the United States" (Chen, 2022). Even though this discussion has also taken into account non-traditional domains of security, examining for instance the link between the war and global food security (Xiao, 2023), the geostrategic trade-offs China has been confronted with in the context of the crisis are arguably the most important markers in this discussion. Yan Shaohua (严少华) from the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University, for instance, identifies the "Russia factor" (俄罗斯因素) as an increasingly influential explanatory variable in the EU-China relationship, noting:

> "…the Russian factor (俄罗斯因素) has reinforced some of the EU's existing perceptions of China and has also led to new changes in its China policy. Specifically, the EU has in politics linked China and Russia, in the economic [domain] reconsidered its dependence (依赖关系) on both countries, and considered China and Russia together into its security strategy (安全战略)."

While carrying implications for China's relationship with Europe, this triangular entanglement is not without opportunity for Chinese strategic engagement, according to Yan:

> "To properly manage the Russian factor…China can constructively navigate the China-EU-Russia triangular relationship by adopting a balanced approach…. to create diplomatic initiative and expand strategic space" (Yan, 2023).

By highlighting the link between Europe's relationship with Russia and its perception of China, Yan (2023) evidently argues for a more strategic and measured approach to the triangular relationship. Given China's desire to access European markets and encourage strategic autonomy from what the Chinese government perceives as a US-led containment strategy against China, Yan's position provides a sense of the strategic calculus that might have informed Beijing's balancing act during the first two years of the war. While Chinese academics are therefore cautious in pointing to the overall consequences of the war, it appears a close relationship with Russia must neither preclude engaging Europe, nor limit China's overall "strategic space," as long as Beijing carefully manages the associated risks.

Finally, apart from balancing its relationships with Russia, Europe and the US, China's third interest in the context of the war has been to preserve its self-proclaimed exceptionalist status across the Global South. Premised on the principles of peaceful co-existence, which emerged from the Bandung Conference in 1955 and the non-aligned movement during the Cold War, China has hitherto branded its rise as a security actor and mediator by drawing on the principle of non-interference. This process is explored in more detail in the next section.

In conclusion, Chinese leaders and thinkers have understood the war to be a critical juncture in the development of global security and the international system, heralding the emergence of great power politics reminiscent of a previous era. In this context, Beijing has attempted to defend three conflicting interests:

- a close relationship with Russia to challenge US primacy,
- a beneficial relationship with Europe to encourage strategic autonomy,
- an exceptionalist relationship with the Global South to uphold China's self-proclaimed status as the world's largest developing country.

Towards a New Diplomatic Framework: The Global Security Initiative

Confronted with these conflicting interests, the Chinese government articulated a broader security framework in the context of the war, the Global Security Initiative (全球安全倡议, GSI). Proposed personally by Xi at the Boao Forum in April 2022, the GSI represents Beijing's attempt to harmonise the aforementioned competing interests, while creating a rhetorical framework to interpret China's role as a security actor and crisis mediator (Xinhua, 2023).

Since its launch, the GSI has gradually become China's main diplomatic framework to discuss global security issues, with various party-state actors—from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the defence and military establishment—advancing the GSI across bi-, pluri- and multilateral domains. Understanding the GSI and its implementation is important because it represents Beijing's attempt at creating a vocabulary to discuss security issues with foreign counterparts, thus enabling exchanges on more sensitive matters such as Russia's war in Ukraine.

The most authoritative document on the GSI is its Concept Paper, published in 2023. According to this document, the GSI is built around the following six core concepts and principles:

- Commitment to the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security.
- Commitment to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries.
- Commitment to abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.
- Commitment to taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously.
- Commitment to peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation.
- Commitment to maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains.

Building on these core principles and concepts, the paper also provided several "priorities of cooperation" for the GSI. Under point five, the GSI commits to promoting the "political settlement of international and regional hotspot issues" by encouraging parties to "overcome differences" through "candid dialogue and communication", while:

> "…support[ing] the international community in constructively participating in the political settlement of hotspots, under the premise of non-interference in internal affairs, mainly through the means of facilitating peace talks, with fairness and practicality as the main attitude, and mainly following the approach of addressing both symptoms and root causes" (Xinhua, 2023)..

As part of this ambition, the GSI notes the "Ukraine crisis" as one of the hotspot issues whose resolution should be supported through "dialogue and negotiation". However, Beijing does not offer a concrete plan for how peace should be achieved, nor does it clearly define what a peaceful settlement should look like. The ambiguity inherent in the GSI and its concept paper may allow the Chinese government to navigate seemingly incompatible interests between different conflict parties, simultaneously precluding meaningful involvement as an agenda setter in any potential mediation process. By and large, this approach is in line with China's wider practice of setting the table (搭台唱戏) instead of the agenda in crisis diplomacy. Beijing may appeal to conflict parties to come to the negotiation table but usually refrains from dictating the terms to be negotiated, calling instead for local solutions.

Building on the GSI, the Chinese government operationalised such an approach in its official "Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis" (MFA, 2023b) as well as Xi Jinping's subsequent "Four Principles" for resolving the crisis (Xinhua, 2024). While rearticulating China's key talking points – especially on highlighting US and European agency in sustaining the war – the position paper emphasised resuming peace talks, addressing humanitarian issues, and reducing nuclear and strategic risks. While far from a genuine peace plan, the twelfth point of the position paper on "promoting post-conflict reconstruction" included the proclamation: "China stands ready to provide assistance and play a constructive role in this endeavour", rounding up a more pro-active position for China in the conclusion of the war than had previously been the case. Xi's four principles, which he articulated during the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Beijing in April 2024, continued along similar lines, with Xi calling for "the upholding of peace and stability", de-escalation, the creation of "conditions for the restoration of peace", and the reduction of "the negative impact on the world economy" as well as global supply chains.

Foreign observers expecting these new Chinese remarks to amount to a peace proposal have, however, misunderstood China's narrative strategy. Building on the above interpretation of the GSI and Chinese conflict management, the primary concern of Chinese leaders is not to dictate the negotiation process but to balance Chinese interests and set the table by injecting Chinese ideas, norms and language into the peace process while retaining a degree of involvement or agency to shape outcomes aligned with the Party's ambitions.

The GSI and subsequent policy documents have therefore become a broader umbrella framework to articulate China's position vis-à-vis Ukraine and Russia in international settings, while bridging the gap between China's conflicting interests. The core principles merge Xi's signature security blueprint, which rests on an expansive understanding of political security guaranteeing the Communist Party's domestic position, with an appeal to universal norms codified in the UN Charter, including sovereignty. The GSI also blurs the domains of traditional and non-traditional security, reflecting the aforementioned emphasis on the effects of Russia's war amongst China's strategic community. Yet, the concept paper also pays tribute to "indivisible security", a concept which originated from the Cold War context in Europe but has since been reappropriated by Russia to justify its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. By synthesising these seemingly contradictory positions, the GSI represents Beijing's desire to actively balance the various actors in and beyond the war in Ukraine while providing the necessary diplomatic vocabulary for such a balancing strategy.

More generally, the GSI architecture heralded a more proactive and innovative approach to foreign affairs and international security, premised on Beijing's perception of an external environment characterised by a greater speed of change, risk and disruption as the country emerged from its strict zero-COVID measures throughout 2023. While foreshadowed by Xi's work report at the 20th Party Congress in 2022, the resulting adjustment in China's top-level foreign policy strategy was formalised at the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference in December 2023. Sources emerging from this conference outline a more proactive strategic direction for Chinese foreign policy going forward (Communist Party of China [CPC], 2023). At the conference, the GSI was identified as part of China's "strategic guidance" (战略引领), suggesting the initiative is already seen as part of this more proactive foreign policy approach. Yet, the conference also hinted at an adjustment in ;Party elites' perception of the external environment.

As "the world has entered a new period of turbulent change", Xi called for increasing China's influence and "shaping power" (塑造力) to promote the construction of a powerful country (CPC, 2023). The conference viewed these developments within the wider trend towards multipolarity, but emphasised resisting "anti-globalisation", "pan-securitisation", "unilateralism and protectionism". These remarks reflect a more assertive and proactive leadership vision for China's foreign policy establishment amid intensifying US-China competition. The evolution of the Chinese "peace plan" on Ukraine into a joint proposal with Brazil—and further Chinese efforts to consolidate support in the Global South and beyond—illustrates China's strategic logic.

Together, China's rhetorical and diplomatic strategy has grown more confident, aligning with a more proactive vision for foreign policy formalised at the aforementioned 2023 Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference. Building on the GSI framework, Beijing has advanced a multi-track approach to actively manage diplomatic language and narratives surrounding the war, and China's role in it.

The Status Quo: China's Outlook in Early 2025

In early 2025, China's foreign policy outlook regarding the war and its conflicting parties is characterised by Beijing's proactive balancing strategy between its various competing interests.

It would be a mistake to perceive China's approach as one of "pro-Russian neutrality", however. Building on the above analysis, Beijing is far from a neutral or passive actor, but aims to proactively manage its relationships with all parties involved to protect its aforementioned interests and increase China's strategic role in a rapidly shifting international environment. From the perspective of one Chinese analyst, the US-Russian talks without Ukrainian and European involvement heralds the "law of the jungle where great powers decide everything", further "fragmenting international order" and "intensifying competition for power" (Ye, 2025). Even though the Foreign Affairs Work Conference recognised these trends in late 2023, it is likely that Chinese foreign policy elites are carefully assessing the rapid shifts in European and transatlantic security and alignment.

A good example of how Beijing is engaging both sides in this context is Wang Yi's and Xi Jinping's dual-track approach in the first half of 2025. While Wang Yi, in his capacity as Foreign Minister, wooed European counterparts at the Munich Security Conference by emphasising inclusive peace negotiations with the involvement of all stakeholders (Shi, 2025), Xi Jinping exchanged views with Vladimir Putin shortly thereafter, noting "China welcomes the positive efforts made by Russia and all parties concerned to defuse the crisis" (Xinhua, 2025). Outside observers may be surprised by the incongruence of official Chinese remarks, advocating for inclusive negotiations on the one hand, while welcoming Russia's bilateral and exclusive diplomatic rapprochement with the US on the other. From the perspective articulated throughout this section, however, China is continuing with a similar strategy of balancing competing interests while utilising US retrenchment to gain strategic advantage on all fronts.

Ukraine's Stance on Resolution of the Conflict and China's Role

Transformation of Perceptions of China's Role in Ukraine's Foreign Policy: Political Component

The perception of China's role within the Ukrainian political establishment and leadership has undergone significant evolution in recent years. These transformations should not be assessed solely within the context of Russia's full-scale aggression since 2022, but should be examined within a broader chronological framework, beginning in 2019. This timeline is particularly relevant due to President Volodymyr Zelensky's[3] electoral victory and his administration's initial attempts to reassess the status quo at that time in Ukraine-China relations.

Consequently, the evolution of the Ukrainian political leadership's policy and attitude towards China can be conditionally divided into the following phases:

1. **2019–2021 –** Efforts to improve bilateral relations and the "Motor Sich" crisis
2. **2022–2023 –** Attempts to leverage China's influence over Russia to halt aggression
3. **2024 –** "Cooling" of relations and emerging criticism by Ukraine

The first phase, a period of conditional "thaw", was characterised by active efforts to revitalise cooperation with China. This approach was largely driven by the newly elected Zelensky administration's ambition to establish a dynamic partnership with China and overcome the political stagnation that had prevailed since 2014, despite proclamation of strategic partnership. The strategy focused on areas where mutual interest was indisputable—namely, trade and economic cooperation. The underlying assumption was that political relations could be reinvigorated through economic engagement, allowing Ukraine to secure favourable loans and credit arrangements.

This rationale was not rootless. Between 2019 and 2021, China was Ukraine's leading trade partner globally. Furthermore, in the three years preceding Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine's exports to China, as well as Chinese imports into Ukraine, steadily increased (*Слово і Діло*, 2024). Ukrainian exports rose from $3.6 billion in 2019 to $8 billion in 2021, while imports from China grew from $9.2 billion to $11 billion over the same period.

Paradoxically, however, this period was also marked by one of the tensest crises in Ukraine-China relations: a dispute regarding Chinese investors' attempts to acquire a controlling stake in Ukraine's strategic defence enterprise, Motor Sich (see above). The Ukrainian government's decision to block the acquisition led to legal action from Chinese investors in international arbitration and, ultimately, to the formal nationalisation of Motor Sich by the Ukrainian government in 2021. This episode significantly undermined mutual trust and hampered the broader bilateral rapprochement envisaged by Kyiv. It also set a precedent for the "security first" principle, which has since been considered fundamental when assessing potential economic cooperation with China.

As a result, the anticipated political partnership at a strategic state level did not materialise. Ukraine's 2020 National Security Strategy did not define China either as a strategic ally or even as a partner. The first direct contact between President Zelensky and President Xi Jinping only took place in July 2021, with discussions predominantly focused on trade relations and new infrastructure projects (President of Ukraine, 2021).

The second stage in Ukraine's evolving attitude towards China's role can be conventionally associated with the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion, lasting until the publication of China's *Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis* in February 2023. During the first 12 months, Ukrainian authorities made persistent efforts—not necessarily to secure China's support, but at least to prevent any indirect support for Russia from Beijing.

However, hopes for a strategic partnership with China at the previous stage of relations gave rise to unrealistic and inflated expectations regarding the beneficial role China could play at the outset of the full-scale war. In Kyiv, the prevailing belief was that China was strategically uninterested in the destabilisation caused by Russia's aggression and that Ukraine could diplomatically secure China's support specifically under the premise of restoring stability. In particular, there was an expectation that China could exert pressure on Russia and play the role of a de facto security guarantor.[4]

The reaction to the so-called Chinese "peace plan" in Ukraine was mixed. The support for territorial integrity expressed by Beijing was viewed positively, but the calls from China for an immediate ceasefire without the necessary withdrawal of Russian troops from temporarily occupied territories were assessed with great ambiguity, and even negatively.

Despite efforts to revive dialogue under these conditions, Kyiv faced a new challenge in 2024: Beijing, having previously adopted a position of conditional political neutrality, began to drift toward countering Ukrainian diplomatic efforts on the international stage. This shift marked what could be considered a third stage in bilateral relations.

This development was accompanied by ongoing contacts between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, with statements about their so-called "unlimited partnership." Public assertions at the NATO level underscored that it is China, along with its support for Russia, that is a decisive factor in the rearmament and modernisation of Russia's military-industrial complex. However, this stage culminated in Ukraine's efforts to organise the Global Peace Summit in June 2024 in Switzerland. The event marked a turning point in Kyiv's assessment of Beijing's role. From cautious attempts at cooperation, Ukraine—including President Zelensky—shifted to active and public criticism of Beijing's position, particularly in light of Beijing's actions during Ukraine's preparations for the summit.

The trigger for this shift was China's policy of creating a diplomatic alternative to the Ukrainian Peace Formula. Ukraine's strategy of presenting three non-controversial, yet compromise-driven points (nuclear security, food security, and the release of prisoners of war and deported children) failed to yield the expected results. Even on these points, which fully aligned with China's rhetoric and official stance, Beijing refused to engage.

Moreover, China not only abstained from participation in the Global Peace Summit but, according to Kyiv's official position, also attempted to persuade other countries outside the Western world not to join (Chen and Lee, 2024). The Chinese-Brazilian alliance culminated in the so-called "Six-Point Consensus" (Government of Brazil, 2024), which effectively presented a parallel agenda to Ukraine's Peace Formula. Furthermore, another concern for the Ukrainian leadership was that the new "plan" made no mention of Ukraine's territorial integrity. China's lobbying of this proposal, alongside Ukraine's efforts to maintain international support across Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, led to heightened bilateral tensions and open criticism of Beijing's policy. "The China-Brazil proposal is destructive, and it is merely a political statement," President Zelensky stated (Lysohor, 2024).

Risks, Challenges and Opportunities of China's Involvement in Conflict Resolution: Ukraine's Perspective

Ukraine's shift in its political assessment of China's role in the Russia-Ukraine war occurred in parallel with a clearer understanding of both the risks and opportunities involved.

Risks

From Ukraine's perspective, the risks of greater Chinese involvement in the negotiations to end the war are not so much related to Ukraine-China relations as they are to the broader global trends of confrontation and competition between China and the US, as well as the strategic interests of key international players (the US, China, individual European countries, the EU and the EU-UK alliance, influential regional actors, and emerging powers such as the BRICS countries [Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates]). In other words, the complexity of involving China and the potential risks involved are linked to the Ukrainian-Russian settlement becoming a tool for competition or, conversely, a means to reach agreements on issues of a significantly broader scale.

Focusing on Ukraine's perspective, discussions about more active Chinese involvement in resolving the war highlights several complex risks.

Risk 1: China's policy on the settlement may ignore several critical principles for Ukraine

This concern pertains to the evolution of China's vision of peace, from the so-called "Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis" to the previously mentioned China-Brazil "peace plan". While the initial "Position" gave Kyiv grounds for cautious optimism, the omission of the fundamental principle of recognising the sovereignty of all countries (which, for Ukraine, primarily meant support for its territorial integrity) and the absence of references to UN Charter principles in the China-Brazil "Six-Point Consensus" signalled, from Ukraine's perspective, a further step away from a conflict resolution format it could accept.

It is entirely reasonable to consider that China views its involvement in the war settlement primarily as a means to advance its soft power, expand its economic and political presence in Europe, and strengthen its influence in international affairs. In this context, China's support for certain aspects of Ukraine's vision aligns strategically with its goal of ensuring that Ukraine is not excluded from the negotiation process and in addressing nuclear security concerns. For Ukraine, a critical issue remains regaining control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. Considering the Trump administration's efforts to initiate negotiations and Ukraine's agreement to a 30-day temporary ceasefire, there appeared to be a situational overlap between the potential compromise visions of both Ukraine and China.

However, it is important to note that while Ukraine considers a stable ceasefire agreement as inseparable from security guarantees, Beijing focuses on the "ceasefire" itself, without mandatory security prerequisites for it or future security guarantees.

Risk 2: If China gains greater influence in the settlement process while continuing to provide economic and political support to Russia, Moscow is likely to use that support to rearm and prepare for a new phase of its war against Ukraine.

This risk, regarded as one of Kyiv's top concerns, is based on China's strategy of formally adhering to political neutrality while deepening its cooperation with Russia. Since Ukraine's key interest in the case of a ceasefire is minimising Russia's capabilities for a new offensive, the preservation and expansion of Chinese-Russian economic, technological, and military cooperation represents a threat and risk.

Under such a scenario, Ukraine's concern is that, alongside expanding its diplomatic opportunities, China will not be motivated to reduce its cooperation with Russia. Specifically, this means that China will not only retain its role as the "decisive enabler of Russia's war," as noted in the NATO Washington Summit Declaration (NATO, 2024), but will likely strengthen it.

The basis for these concerns includes the fact that over the past few years, China has become a monopoly supplier of several rare metals to Russia, which are used in the production of weapons (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2025).

Specifically, 100% of Russia's gallium and germanium imports in 2023 came from China, following sanctions on their supply by the EU and the US, with the volumes of these metals purchased nearly doubling compared to 2022. According to publicly disclosed claims by the Ukrainian authorities in 2024, up to 60% of foreign components in the weapons used by Russia come from China (Payne, 2024). Moreover, in addition to raw materials and components, there was a sharp increase in exports of critical dual-use goods—such as laser equipment and metalworking machines—from China to Russia after 2022. These goods can be used by Russia for the production of weapons, namely military drones. Increase in Chinese exports of these products has been, among other things, the reason for the introduction of US sanctions on the respective Chinese companies.

Risk 3: Diplomatic engagement with China is likely to be accompanied by another attempt to gain access to strategic industries and enterprises in Ukraine.

The presence of this risk is justified by several factors.

Firstly, Chinese companies have already attempted to gain de facto access to a controlling stake in Ukraine's strategic defence enterprise, Motor Sich. Since then, the importance of defence and other technologies for Ukraine's security has only increased, along with the risks of cooperating with China in light of its partnership with Russia.

Secondly, it is standard Chinese policy to combine security and economic policies in post-conflict environments (Mariani, 2024). This is a principle of China's presence, particularly in Africa. In the event that Ukraine and the US sign an agreement on mineral resources, which Trump has been working on since his election in November 2024, new strategic infrastructure facilities in Ukraine will be under the control and ownership of the Ukraine-US fund. This will significantly limit China's economic opportunities.

Thirdly, this risk will grow if, in the event that the US stops providing financial and economic support to Ukraine and shifts these responsibilities to Europe, some European countries become open to sharing the burden with China. Accessible financing, faster implementation, and more flexible decision-making regarding investments and inflows from Beijing could make such offers politically appealing in the context of growing US isolationism.

However, the abovementioned risks can be minimised and mitigated through the following steps:

1. Strengthen Ukraine's alliance with European states (either the EU plus partners, or in the form of a "Coalition of the Willing") to provide a counterbalance to independent US policy on conflict resolution. Consolidating resources and diplomatic efforts will enhance the self-sufficiency of both Ukraine and a united Europe in security and defence policy over the medium and long term. This will decrease the need to rely on China for diplomatic cooperation in the short term.

2. Diversify sources of funding for reconstruction to minimise the risks associated with high dependence on Chinese loans and investments. The principle of "the more donors the better" should apply.

3. Develop reconstruction and rebuilding programmes while simultaneously establishing clear procedures and rules for investors. In particular, eligibility criteria should be defined to ensure the security of critical technologies and access to them.

4. Guarantee a larger contingent of European forces than those (potentially) provided or offered by China, or other states outside Europe, in any security/peacekeeping/peacebuilding mission on the ground in Ukraine.

Opportunities and Their Limits

Notably, political and expert discussions in Ukraine reveal a strong interest in tactical or situational rapprochement with China. However, the potential benefits or favourable outcomes of a more active Chinese role—both at the current stage of the war and during the future reconstruction—are widely seen as unlikely. Nevertheless, Ukraine's perspective on possible future cooperation with China has its own logic and advocates.

Diplomatic opportunities: tactical and pragmatic cooperation to counterbalance Russia's efforts for a bilateral agreement with the United States

Despite Ukraine's inability to establish an active dialogue with China, the Trump administration's diplomatic strategy simultaneously creates opportunities for a tactical convergence of interests between Ukraine, Europe—including the United Kingdom—and China.

A principal risk for Ukraine, the EU and the UK lies in a potential direct agreement or a "deal" between the US and Russia that disregards the interests of both Ukraine and Europe. A rupture in transatlantic unity concerning Russian aggression may compel the UK, EU member states and Ukraine to manoeuvre strategically and engage China in a tactical partnership aimed at promoting the concept of a multilateral negotiation framework for ending the war—an approach that China has consistently advocated for. Whereas China's involvement in negotiations previously yielded greater benefits for Beijing, this is no longer the case. In the current context, such engagement may tactically serve to provide a counterbalance to the US-Russia track of negotiations.

Nevertheless, this initiative is not unequivocally positive in terms of its broader implications. It would mark a departure from the gradual course of decoupling and de-risking, effectively placing on hold efforts to diminish the economic and industrial dependency of European nations on China. The idea of tactical rapprochement between Ukraine and its European partners with China has severe limitations – first and foremost, tactical and short-term cooperation is not a priority for China, which will prioritise its strategic goals in Europe. Among these is China's interest in Ukraine serving as a buffer zone between Russia and the EU. From China's point of view, this can still align with its understanding that Ukraine represents a strategic point rather than a strategic asset, especially given that rising tensions with the West limit China's access to EU markets. This creates a dilemma for Beijing: rather than agreeing to cooperate tactically with Ukraine, the EU or the UK, China is likely to adapt and seek out strategic presence in Europe's security architecture and markets.

Another dimension of diplomatic opportunities for engagement with China pertains to its diplomacy in other global regions—particularly the so-called Global South, where Ukraine's efforts to promote its Peace Formula have yielded limited success. While China's efforts in 2024 to obstruct the Global Peace Summit in Switzerland exacerbated tensions in Ukraine-China relations, in 2025, Beijing's influence in Latin America and Africa may offer short-term advantages for Ukraine. Specifically, China's position could be leveraged to advance the idea of a multilateral peace format that is not confined to a US-Russia rapprochement.

Economic and trade opportunities

Within a pragmatic framework for cooperation with China, Ukraine can explore economic and trade initiatives. The least risky areas for collaboration are those where prior cooperation has already taken place and where mutual interests are aligned.

One such area is agricultural production and trade, particularly grain exports. According to Ukraine's Ministry of Agrarian Policy and Food (Verkhovna Rada, 2025), in 2024 Ukraine restored its pre-2022 export levels in the agricultural sector, amounting to $24.5 billion, which constitutes 59% of total exports. This marks the second-highest historical record, following the $27.7 billion agricultural exports of 2021.

Furthermore, amid full-scale war, Ukraine has effectively utilised "food diplomacy"—leveraging commodity access and market provisions to achieve foreign policy objectives. In this context, Ukraine's current strategy aims to expand its agricultural export markets, particularly for grains, maize, sunflower oil, wheat, soybeans, and pulses. Presently, 55% of Ukrainian agricultural exports are directed to the EU market. However, given growing political tensions with EU member states on agricultural issues, a debate has emerged over whether Ukraine should diversify its exports to China as a hedge against EU agricultural policies, at least until it is granted full-fledged EU membership.

China is Ukraine's second-largest trading partner[5] after the EU, providing a foundation for enhanced Ukraine-China agricultural cooperation and market integration. Additionally, the EU's Green Deal, which raises compliance standards beyond purely agricultural criteria, might indirectly incentivise Ukraine-China cooperation in the agricultural sector on a short- to mid-term basis. China's primary concern remains affordable and abundant food supplies, making Ukrainian exports particularly attractive.

External factors that could further drive Ukraine-China agricultural cooperation include global food inflation, rising transportation costs through the Balkans, and the EU's demographic challenges, such as an ageing farming population—factors that strengthen Ukraine's competitive position in securing export contracts. Despite territorial losses and difficulties with maritime grain exports, Ukraine retains a strong position in the global agricultural market.

Beyond agriculture, other sectors presenting promising opportunities for Ukraine-China economic collaboration include metallurgy and mining (as China is the world's largest importer of iron), logistics and transportation (if EU policies on decoupling and de-risking from China are put on hold), as well as renewable energy.

However, while planning the diversification of trade and economic cooperation with China, Ukraine should adhere to the "security first" principle—meaning that the economic benefits and added value of any trade or infrastructure initiatives must be assessed through the lens of potential security risks.

Reconstruction opportunities

China's potential participation in Ukraine's post-war or post-ceasefire reconstruction remains one of the less clearly defined—yet arguably most rational—dimensions of bilateral relations between Kyiv and Beijing.

Thus, while political differences over the negotiation process created tensions between China and Ukraine in 2024, both Chinese and Ukrainian leadership continued to view China's participation in Ukraine's reconstruction as mutually beneficial. Notably, in this context, Ukraine has partially reverted to its earlier approach to China—emphasising the opening of credit lines and launching infrastructure projects.

In February 2025, President Volodymyr Zelensky publicly emphasised the potential role of China in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. However, he explicitly linked this prospect to the provision of security guarantees for Ukraine:

> *"The priority [for reconstruction – ed.] will be Ukrainian businesses and all countries that provide us with security guarantees. I believe this would be fair for all our partners. That is, they will offer us security guarantees, and in return, we will offer them business opportunities," the President stated. "I believe that we can maintain economic relations with China, and I also believe that— as we have consistently emphasised during the Peace Formula discussions and at the Summit— China must necessarily be present, particularly when issues concerning Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty are being discussed." (Ukrinform, 2025)*

China response that Beijing would help "in accordance with the wishes of the parties" was formulated by Li Ming, a spokesman for China's foreign aid and international development agency (Zhen, 2025), in the wake of US active diplomacy aimed at setting up negotiations with Russia.

When analysing possible Chinese involvement in Ukraine's reconstruction, several factors that help illuminate how Beijing is planning its future international aid should be taken into account.

Firstly, China's interest in the reconstruction of Ukraine would be not a separate policy, but part of long-term strategy where negotiation, mediation, and security policy are deeply interconnected with reconstruction initiatives. This appears to be a highly effective policy tool to increase China's influence in the Global South, which has allowed China to respond to the deceleration of its domestic economic processes (Bin and Renge, 2025).

Secondly, China has making strategic shifts in its international aid agenda. Indeed, from large-scale infrastructure projects driven by a top-down partnership approach, China has been strategically moving towards so called "small and beautiful" projects. In particular, this recalibration from state-to-state loans and large projects to community-based and community-targeted smaller projects was officially established in the recent China International Development Cooperation Agency report (2025). Tools and ideology, born within the Belt and Road Initiative, have now been transferred to China's foreign aid policy generally. However, the practical understanding of "small and beautiful projects" has also evolved. China increasingly views these projects as not only implemented at the local level, but also as involving active participation from local governments, businesses, and social organisations. They are no longer planned as entirely top-down initiatives, but they are not purely grassroots or community-driven either (Bin and Renge, 2025).

Thirdly, as a logical step in this transformation, China is doubling down on creating comprehensive aid ecosystems, where people-to-people ties form the foundation of long-term and sustainable soft power in target societies. However, in the case of Ukraine—though not exclusively—China lacks established cooperation and partnership networks on the ground, particularly among NGOs and local professionals who should serve as the cornerstone of this new framework.

Despite significant shifts in China's foreign aid approach and its strategic goal of positioning itself as a leader in "South-South cooperation" (Bin and Renge, 2025), it is unlikely that Beijing will fully transition to prioritising small, locally embedded projects over highly visible, large-scale initiatives. In the event of a ceasefire or a substantial reduction in the intensity of warfare with Russia, reconstruction could begin in the near future—potentially marking China's first major attempt to implement this new aid framework in Ukraine.

China's Leverage in the Global South and its Impact on the Russo-Ukrainian War

China's leverage in the so-called Global South constitutes a significant dimension of China's overall role and attempts to participate more actively in the resolution of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Moreover, it is also an integral part of the broader picture of China's approach towards the US and Europe, analysed in the section above.

At present, several key messages that are particularly relevant in light of a Russo-Ukrainian settlement and China's policy towards the Global South can be identified:

- Rising geopolitical instability and uncertainty, accelerated after the shift in US foreign policy after the 2024 presidential elections, should be counterbalanced by China's global role;
- Multilateralism must be preserved for international conflict resolution and negotiations;
- Strategic autonomy might hold additional value in times of ruptured transatlantic unity between the US and Europe;
- Already existing Chinese economic (Belt and Road Initiative) and diplomatic (Chinese-Brazil "Six-Point Consensus" and Group of Friends formed by China in 2024 in support of it) initiatives are presented by China as a framework for justification for China's more active involvement.

These messages are reflected in the practical implementation of China's international efforts to consolidate its influence in the Global South. To this end, China has consistently pursued a dual strategy, combining engagement at the international level with bilateral relations across Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

Russia's aggressive violation of Ukrainian sovereignty has put China in a difficult position at the international level, especially within multilateral organisations such as the UN. In response, China has crafted a narrative strategy that seeks to emphasise a degree of separation from Russian interests. In the words of Ambassador Geng Shuang (耿爽) at the UN Security Council:

> "First, China's position on the Ukraine issue is objective and impartial. We neither support any party, nor do we favour any party. China has always adhered to the general direction of a political settlement of the Ukraine crisis, and has maintained contacts with all parties concerned, including Russia and Ukraine. During the general debate of the 79th UNGA session, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held respective meetings with his Russian and Ukrainian counterparts to actively promote peace talks. We have provided timely briefings to Russia and Ukraine on the holding of the ministerial meeting on Ukraine and the establishment of the Group of Friends for Peace, and have listened to their views" (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2024a).

By referring to its "objective" stance on the crisis, China has attempted to signal to its developing partners that it takes matters of sovereignty seriously, while avoiding concrete commitments to limiting its relationship with Moscow. This rhetorical strategy has mostly persisted, as evidenced by Ambassador Fu's remarks in February 2025:

> "China's position on the Ukraine issue has been clear-cut, unequivocal, and consistent… China sent a special envoy on a proactive mission of shuttle diplomacy, and stays engaged with the relevant parties, including Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and Europe, calling for adherence to the three principles, namely, no spillover of the battlefield, no escalation of the fighting, and no provocation by any party. Together with Brazil and other countries of the Global South, we set up a Group of Friends for Peace to pool the wisdom of the Global South and create an important force that supports and pushes for peace" (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2025).

By depicting China as a third party on the same side as the Global South, Beijing is utilising diplomatic narratives around the war to insulate its own position from criticism, while appealing to the support of the global majority in the UN General Assembly.

The remarks by Ambassador Fu also demonstrate the evolution in Chinese rhetoric towards the conflict. What began as the reiteration of Beijing's long-held diplomatic principles, including sovereignty and non-interference in the earlier stages of Chinese positioning, evolved into a more proactive framing of China's role in resolving the crisis, including through its appeal to the Global South (Stec and Seiwert, 2025).

The clearest expression of this more proactive vision to build international coalitions—beginning with bilateral political rapprochement in support of Chinese positions—was the "Six-Point Consensus," jointly promoted by China and Brazil in May 2024. This initiative represented Beijing's attempt to incorporate both the Global South and a key BRICS member into its broader narrative strategy on the war (Government of Brazil, 2024). The consensus mostly reiterated existing talking points and positions, but could be interpreted as a more assertive call for "dialogue and negotiation" as "the only viable solution to the Ukraine crisis", with both sides supporting the establishment of an international peace conference that is "recognized by both Russia and Ukraine, with equal participation of all parties as well as fair discussion of all peace plans."

The consensus also promoted a framing of China (and Brazil) as arbiters of stability, reinforcing China's image as a major and responsible global power—particularly among countries of the Global South. Accordingly, the statement condemned "[dividing the world into isolated political or economic groups"—likely a veiled criticism of Western sanctions—and called for "efforts to enhance international cooperation on energy, currency, finance, trade, food security and the security of critical infrastructure, including oil and gas pipelines, undersea optical cables, electricity and energy facilities, and fibre-optic networks, so as to protect the stability of global industrial and supply chains." The latter points are of obvious importance to countries of the Global South, which face secondary risks and consequences of the war, reflecting China's ambition to project its status as self-proclaimed representative of developing country concerns in international fora.

The China-Brazil statement thus initiated the process of plurilateralising China's narrative, which was further reinforced by the creation of a Group of Friends of Peace at the United Nations in September 2024. In December 2024, at the first meeting of the group since September, the participants acknowledged "cross-regional participation mainly from the Global South" and reaffirmed their adherence to core principles including "respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, respecting the legitimate concerns of states, recognising the need to uphold the principles of peace, security and prosperity, and the importance of peaceful solutions for all international conflicts, as emphasised by the Bandung principles" (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2024b).

China has thus successfully embedded the language and rhetoric of the Global Security Initiative into a multilateral UN initiative, thereby building a loose coalition in support of its own framing of the war, while also bolstering its claim to leadership in the Global South.

Conclusions

The current dynamics of Ukraine-China relations are shaped not only by the ongoing large-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine and China's position on the war, but also by a longer-term bilateral history. This includes shared roots in the Soviet past, a focus on economic ties and agricultural interests after 1991, China's attempts to gain access to Ukraine's strategic industries and technologies, and Kyiv's aspirations to reset relations with Beijing just prior to the full-scale invasion.

While Ukraine's policy towards China has not always been consistent, China's policy on Ukraine is a part of broader and strategic foreign policy agenda. In particular, China has been steadily promoting the idea of reshaping the international system in a way that enables the realisation of the Chinese leadership's grand strategic ambitions. Moreover, security has recently become one of the central pillars of China's domestic and foreign policy, especially when compared to Xi's previous terms. As such, China's approach to Russia's war against Ukraine—and to its potential resolution—cannot be separated from Beijing's broader goal of positioning itself as a major power and key stakeholder in the global order.

Consequently, on the one hand, the Chinese government aims to avoid conflation between Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a sovereign country with its own territorial politics, chief among them the unresolved Taiwan issue. On the other hand, while keen to maintain a strong relationship with Moscow, Beijing still wants to avoid a complete alienation of its Euro-Atlantic counterparts.

Thus, Ukraine-China relations are directly impacted by several, and to a certain extent conflicting, Chinese interests: its close relationship with Russia aimed at challenging US primacy; its efforts to develop a beneficial relationship with Europe to encourage strategic autonomy on the part of the latter; and its exceptionalist stance towards the Global South, which upholds China's self-proclaimed status as the world's largest developing country. The Global Security Initiative (April 2022) frames China's position on Russia's war in Ukraine and beyond, defining the "Ukraine crisis" as one of several hotspot issues that should be resolved through "dialogue and negotiation." Despite not offering concrete practical steps—even for a ceasefire—China adheres to an approach of *setting the table* (搭台唱戏) rather than setting the agenda in crisis diplomacy. While Beijing's role is far from neutral or passive, China's position on conflict resolution is to proactively manage its relationships with all parties involved in order to protect its own interests and expand its global role in a shifting international system.

At the same time, Ukraine's perspective on China and its potential role in conflict resolution has been more dynamic, marked by significant changes in how Ukraine's political elites approach China, and to a lesser extent by Ukraine's broader strategic foreign policy framework. These factors partially explain the transformation in Ukraine's political leadership's perception of Ukraine-China relations over the past five years. Starting with President Volodymyr Zelensky's team's 2019 idea to revitalise—or effectively implement—the strategic partnership with China, this perception has undergone critical changes following the outbreak of Russia's full-scale aggression.

Since 2022, Ukraine's efforts to establish close political cooperation with China were driven by overly optimistic expectations that China would use its leverage over Russia to prevent Moscow from prolonging the war. However, as China-Russia cooperation deepened, Ukraine began to adopt are more realistic view of China's role in potential negotiations and conflict resolution. Still, while expectations were tempered, they did not entirely disappear—even amid public criticism of Beijing.

Moreover, China's role and leverage in the so-called Global South directly impacts Ukraine's vision of conflict resolution on the one hand, and reflect dynamics of Kyiv-Beijing relations on the other. By depicting China as a third party on the same side as the Global South, Beijing is promoting narratives around the war to insulate its own position from criticism, while appealing to the support of the global majority in the UN General Assembly.

Endnotes

[1] Interview with Ukraine's Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Kyiv, January 2025.

[2] Literally: "to follow in the tracks of an overturned cart".

[3] Note that Zelenskyy is translated into English as Zelensky.

[4] From an interview with Yuriy Poita, a Ukrainian expert on Chinese foreign policy.

[5] For reference. Growth of the top five categories of Ukrainian commodity exports to China (at the level of product positions):Iron ore raw materials (iron ores and concentrates) – by USD 1.02 billion, accounting for 42.7% of the total exports of goods to China; Maize (corn) – by USD 552 million, or 23.1%; Oilseed cake and other solid residues from the extraction of vegetable fats and oils – by USD 324 million, or 13.6%; Sunflower oil – by USD 105 million, or 4.5%/ Ivan US (National Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025).

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Expert Interviews

1. Nataliya Plaksiyenko-Butyrska Expert and researcher on Eastern Asia, Senior Analyst at the "New Europe" Centre, independent think tank on foreign policy issues, 22 January 2025.

2. Yurii Poita Ukrainian China expert, head of Asia-Pacific Section at the Kyiv-based Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies (CACDS), visiting research fellow at Taipei-based Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR), 23 January 2025.

3. Hrystyna Zelenuik International Observer at TSN, prominent Ukrainian media outlet, 23 January 2025.

4. Oskana Osmachko, Deputy Minister of EU-Integration and International Cooperation, 15 January 2025.

5. Pawlo Klimkin, former Foreign Minister, Government of Ukraine, and now envoy to Brussels, 16 January 2025.

6. Official from International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), January 2025.

7. Official from Special Communications Service, January 2025.

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University of Edinburgh, School of Law, Old College, South Bridge, EH8 9YL

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University of Edinburgh, School of Law, Old College, South Bridge EH8 9YL

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