



GLOBAL TRANSITIONS SERIES



Sino-European relations amid the war in Ukraine

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Key Points

The war in Ukraine is redefining global geopolitics and is affecting already strained relations between China and Europe. Despite diverse interpretations of the war's root cause and contested threat perceptions, there is undoubtedly shared interests between China and Europe. Namely, both wish to avoid escalation of the conflict, manage the fall-out of the war, and explore options for its resolution.

- ▶ Europe should prioritise critical crisis-management and enlist China's support to prevent the war's escalation. Both official and un-official diplomatic avenues should be pursued to achieve this.
- ▶ There is scope for Sino-European cooperation in managing the global repercussions of the war, particularly the growing risk of food insecurity.
- ▶ China and Europe should cooperate in finding a negotiated solution to the conflict via a geopolitical agreement that involves both the warring parties and external actors.
- ▶ Bilateral government consultations and EU-China exchanges offer opportunities for strengthening communication and dialogue between Europe and China on the war in Ukraine. Efforts to engage and coordinate should be insulated from contentious issues where positions diverge.

Fraying EU-China relations and a “dialogue of the deaf”

The relationship between China and Europe is historically complex, and characterised by fluctuations between shared and divergent interests. The former entails developing economic ties and addressing the common challenges of the climate crisis and global public health. The latter comprises both political and ideological disparity on issues of human rights, democracy, and rule of law. The resultant messages are often contradictory, as Europe's attempts to reach pragmatic consensus are undermined by areas of contention that are managed with friction and rebuff, rather than cooperation.

China is the European Union's lead trade partner. In 2021 the EU and China traded goods worth more than 696 billion euro ([European Commission 2022](#)), with 472.8 billion euro of Chinese exports going to the EU and 223.6 billion euro of EU exports to China. Reflecting a relationship driven by economics and a burgeoning trade, Europe has often found ways to manage disagreements with China. In the past few years, however, contentious issues – trade measures challenging market opportunities, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, the security crackdown in Hong Kong, the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and policy related to Taiwan, to name a few – have led to a critical reassessment of Europe's relationship with China.

The 2019 EU-China strategic outlook ([European Commission 2019](#)) described China as a partner for cooperation and negotiation, but also as an economic competitor and systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. In early 2021, only a few months after agreeing a new Comprehensive Agreement on Investments (CAI) ([European Commission 2020](#)), the EU and China traded sanctions over Xinjiang. By March 2021, the EU had imposed sanctions on Chinese officials implicated in human rights violations in Xinjiang, and China retaliated by sanctioning EU parliamentarians, scholars and think tanks. In May 2021 the European Parliament voted to freeze ratification of the CAI, obliging China to lift its sanctions first.

Meanwhile a surge of European interest in the Indo-Pacific region has led to growing friction over Taiwan and Chinese policies in the South China Sea. In October 2021, the European Parliament castigated China's aggressive behaviour in the Taiwan strait, and praised Taiwan as a partner during the pandemic with "a capacity to provide equally valuable contributions to the international community" ([European Parliament 2021](#)). Two weeks later, the first European Parliament delegation visited Taipei. In November 2021, Lithuania broke diplomatic custom and let Taiwan open a representative office in Vilnius under the name of Taiwan -- rather than Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, the usual designation for Taiwan's de facto embassies. To China, this supported the "false" assumption of "one China, one Taiwan" ([XinhuaNet 2021](#)), thus challenging the one-China principle and Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity. The crisis embroiled the whole EU, who viewed China's downgrading of diplomatic ties with Lithuania and a de facto trade boycott an attack on the European single market. The consequent recommendation from the EU was the creation of an anti-coercion instrument (ACI) ([Antall 2022](#)).

As relations have deteriorated, perceptions of China in Europe, both from the public and government elites, have hardened. The virtual EU-China summit on 1 April 2022 ended without any major developments as the two sides maintained differences on major issues. The most notable divergence was the most recent: how to respond to Russia's war on Ukraine. Hosted just five weeks after the beginning of the invasion, the summit was consequently dominated by the EU's attempts to put the war in Ukraine front and centre of the agenda. The EU expressed hopes that China would use its influence as a major power and permanent member of the U.N. Security Council to convince Russia to end the war, whilst additionally expressing commitment to denying any active military support to Russia. China, conversely, wanted to set aside differences over Ukraine and other contentious issues and focus instead on the positive, mainly economic, aspects of the relationship. It stuck to general statements of wishing peace and de-escalation in Ukraine whilst avoiding specific commitments. The inability to produce a joint statement and any list of 'deliverables' led Josip Borrell, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, to label the summit as a "dialogue of the deaf" ([Borrell 2022](#)).

In Western Europe, Sino-European relations have worsened steadily over the past few years. In Central and Eastern Europe, by contrast, relations with China have deteriorated more rapidly, in a downward trend that has accelerated since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. China's engagement in the region derives primarily from the former "17+ 1" platform, which was launched by the First China-Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) Summit held in Poland in 2012. The platform aims to expand cooperation in the fields of investments, transport, finance, science, education, and culture. Today it is known as the 14+1 initiative after Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia withdrew from the initiative within the last eighteen months. At present, the next China-CEEC summit is scheduled for 2023, although the remaining CEEC countries have become cautious, if not publicly critical, of China. They have expressed disappointment with the slow pace of economic cooperation and mistrust – or in some cases, anger – at what is perceived as China's pro-Russia stance on the war in Ukraine. Excepting Hungary and Serbia, across Central and Eastern Europe the emphasis on pursuing economic opportunities with China has been replaced by concerns over security. Countries including Poland, Romania, Czech Republic and Slovakia have reassessed their relations with China through the lens of the Moscow-Beijing axis.

Understanding Europe's and China's perspectives on Ukraine

Europe and China share interests regarding the war in Ukraine; neither wanted it to unfold, and both want its swift end to avoid further impact on their own economies. However, China's and Europe's positions on who is to blame for the war and how to navigate it differ widely, and neither appear to fully appreciate the other's threat perceptions or the complexity of the challenges they face.

For Europe, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a significant threat to European security. Europe has condemned Russia's war of aggression because it is a flagrant breach of law in the middle of the continent that, as former Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg presaged in 2014, represents the end of an era of peace in Europe ([Schwarzenberg 2014](#)). Politicians and officials in Europe have been adamant that their condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and their support for Ukraine's sovereignty and democracy are motivated by values and security concerns, as opposed to the imposition of US foreign policy upon the continent. Chinese officials and scholars do not seem to fully appreciate these ideological and security preoccupations. In particular, they appear to underestimate the concern in Central and Eastern European countries at Russia's attempts to re-draw Europe's borders by force, risking their states becoming the next target of invasion.

Given China's long-standing commitment to policies of non-interference, non-intervention, and state sovereignty, there is a shared dismay within Europe at China's approach towards the gross violations of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In European policy circles, many now perceive China as anything but neutral and highlight an implied hypocrisy. As MEP Reinhard Butikofer has observed, China has "always preached the gospel of national sovereignty and territorial integrity", but "when it came to the national sovereignty of Ukraine, all of a sudden that principle went down the drain" ([Kaczynski 2022](#)).

China's perception differs drastically from that of the EU. It is economically, financially and military connected with both Russia and Ukraine. The volume of its trade with Russia is by far larger than that with Ukraine ([Melkadze 2022](#)), but over the past ten years China has invested in numerous construction and infrastructure projects in Ukraine within the framework of its Belt and Road Initiative, which was endorsed by Ukraine in 2017; the bilateral trade between the two has also risen consistently. In 2021, the trade turnover between Ukraine and China reached nearly USD 19 billion, with significant Ukrainian exports to China in key sectors such as agriculture products – in 2021, China imported twenty nine percent of its corn crop from Ukraine ([Farm Bureau 2022](#)) – iron ore, and military goods. Consequently, China has always professed neutrality in the previous conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, even during the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea, and Russia's military aggression in Eastern Ukraine.

However, the intensity and impact of the current war in Ukraine have forced China to leave its comfort zone of "business as usual" and to display more openly its underlying strategic perceptions. China views the war in Ukraine through the lens of geopolitical rivalry. It disagrees with Russia's invasion of Ukraine but, in line with Chinese foreign policy discourse, places the war within the context of a U.S. strategy to advance Western hegemony. From a Chinese viewpoint, NATO's eastward expansion - comparable for China with the US' and its allies' strategies and the emerging alliances such as the Quadrilateral security dialogue (US, Australia, India and Japan) and the trilateral security pact AUKUS (Australia, UK and US) in the Asia-Pacific region - is the root cause of the problem. Accordingly, China's sees the conflict in Ukraine as a proxy war between a US-controlled West and Russia prompted by NATO expansion.

If in Europe the war is considered a flagrant violation of the rules-based order, for many in China it is another war of intervention ([Wang 2022](#)), this time initiated by Russia, rather than by the US, in response to a real security threat from the United States, similar to the threat that China will face in the future. China is not anti-European, but views Europe as a trading block that lacks strategic independence. It perceives European criticisms as biased and driven by an anti-China agenda that is promoted by its chief global rival, the United States. According to this view, Europe should escape its dependence on the United States and pursue a "third way" of strategic autonomy, one where it takes responsibility for its own security and develops more benevolent policies and attitudes towards China ([Stec, Ghiretti 2022](#)).

China also sees Europe as very fragmented, especially when it comes to political and social questions, with individual countries showing different policies and attitudes vis-à-vis China. This is partly the reason why China attaches greater importance to ties with individual states such as Germany and France, than to EU institutions. Such views affect China's perspectives of the role of Europe in the war in Ukraine. For China, Europe is caught in a big geopolitical game, whereby Europe's position only partly reflects security concerns, but without being fully autonomous from US policy, especially regarding the imposition of sanctions.

With a multipolar world order in sight, China sees the need to develop new regional and sub-regional security projects that are not dominated by the US and therefore have more legitimacy than the rules-based order created by Western powers. Amid growing US-China rivalry, China has been reinforcing its strategic partnership with Russia, its sole great power partner. Both share common interests, particularly that of promoting a new international order that better accommodates their respective national interests and is not dominated by the West. Only three weeks before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, on 4 February 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in Beijing at the opening ceremony of the XXIV Olympic Winter Games. At the end of their talks, they issued a joint statement hailing an "unlimited friendship" with "no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation" ([President of Russia 2022](#)).

Despite its clear – although debatable – strategic assumptions, China is in a dilemma. Europe and the US are China's largest trading partners and the sources of much needed technologies. A protracted high-intensity conflict in Ukraine risks worsening already frayed relations with the West, possibly with high political, economic and reputational costs. At the same time, Russia is an extremely valuable partner for China and a Russian defeat with a potential political crisis in Moscow would be for China a negative outcome impacting negatively on its competition with the West. This is what makes China's attitude to the war in Ukraine appear ambivalent, if not contradictory. It is indeed a difficult task for China to reconcile its complex relationships and strategic interests that often pull in different directions.

China's precarious balancing act

China's geopolitical and geo-economic calculations have resulted in attempts to balance stated neutrality with diplomatic and economic support for Russia. Simultaneously, it has tried to safeguard economic and political relationships with Western countries.

China's domestic media and propaganda machine lays the blame squarely on the US and NATO for first instigating, then provisioning and enabling the war and its continuation through both arms and aid ([Guan 2022](#)). Chinese officials and media usually do not describe events in Ukraine as a "war", or Russia's intervention as an "invasion", instead using terminologies such as "crisis" and "conflict". By giving the Chinese public a predominantly one-sided version of the scale and nature of the war, China has helped to amplify Russia's narrative that it was forced to engage militarily in Ukraine to defend itself against NATO's expansionism.

In its international rhetoric, China purports to take a position of neutrality. It has not explicitly condoned or condemned Russia's war of aggression and it has called for the respect of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and a peaceful settlement ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022](#)). At the UN, China has either abstained from the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly votes or has voted in full solidarity with Russia. China abstained from the vote on a UN Security Council draft resolution on 25 February 2022 requesting Russia to stop attacking Ukraine and to withdraw its troops ([Nichols, Pamuk 2022](#)). China also abstained at a UN General Assembly vote on 2 March condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine in violation of Article 2 of the UN Charter ([United Nations 2022](#)). More recently, on 1 October, China abstained on a UN Security Council draft resolution condemning Russia's illegal annexations of Ukrainian territory, and it abstained from a UN General Assembly vote on 12 October that overwhelmingly condemned Russia's actions and called on states not to recognize any of Russia's annexation claims ([United Nations 2022](#)). There have been occasions where China's diplomacy has tilted more in Russia's favour, for example in April 2022 when China voted against a resolution by the UN General Assembly calling for Russia to be suspended from the Human Rights Council ([United Nations 2022](#)). A similar pattern has occurred in other UN affiliated bodies, where China has shielded Russia against Ukraine war-related motions.

Wary of the risk of being hit by secondary sanctions, Chinese companies have so far carefully avoided actions that would violate Western sanctions. However, Chinese officials are opposed to anti-Russia sanctions imposed by the US and other western countries because, in their view, sanctions “weaponise” international economic and financial relations, whilst expanding the influence and geo-economic reach of the West. Crucially, China remains Russia’s largest trading partner ([WITS 2022](#)) and it has emerged as the only non-Western country able to significantly offset the effect of western sanctions imposed on Russia. Recent data shows that China’s growing imports from Russia of energy, mineral and agricultural products at a bargain price are giving a lifeline to the deteriorated Russian economy and are strengthening Russia’s ability to continue the war. In August 2022, China’s imports of Russian coal was 57% higher than in the same period in 2021 ([Reuters 2022](#)), while crude oil imports from Russia increased by 28% ([Habershon 2022](#)).

China's evolving stance on the war

The fact that China has a strategic partnership with Russia does not mean that China's foreign policy will turn to Russia unconditionally. China has never recognised Russia's annexation of Crimea, or the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk republics when they declared their independence from Ukraine. Nor has it recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. It is inconceivable, therefore, that China will ever recognise Russia's recent annexation of the territories it occupies in eastern and southern Ukraine. Another boundary for China – at least until now - has been the provision of military aid to fill in Russia's dwindling supplies in Ukraine. At a global policy level, there are some fundamental differences between China and Russia. Whereas Russia has a radical rejection of the current world order under which its role has decreased since the end of the Cold War, China has prospered over the past three decades and therefore it aims for greater integration and influence under the existing order, instead of undoing it. The abrupt destabilisation of the international system, which is so crucial to its economic development, does not conform to China's long-term interests.

China's cost-benefit calculations of the war in Ukraine are gradually changing. It can be argued that, to date, the economic repercussions of the war have affected the West more negatively than China and that as Russia increasingly needs China as a diplomatic partner, military ally, and market for its energy exports, the war is shifting the power balance in China's favour. Moreover, the war can be perceived as a useful opportunity for China to test Western response capabilities in case of a future confrontation, for example, over Taiwan. However, with the war in its eighth month continuing to rage, soaring energy and commodity prices, the emergence of new security challenges - not least Russia's escalation with its "partial mobilisation" and threats of using nuclear weapons – and the deterioration of relations with Europe, the balance for China now tilts towards the disadvantages outweighing the benefits. Consequently, China has started to express dissatisfaction with the protracted conflict. In a subtle admission of the limits of Chinese support as recently as September 2022, at a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation President Putin acknowledged that China had "questions and concerns" about the war ([Lau, Shi 2022](#)). Later, when sham referendums began in Russian-held areas of Ukraine on whether to link up with Russia, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi told his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, that China respects Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and rejects force ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022](#)). The main concern in China's costs-benefits analysis is that, with no end in sight, Russia's war might cause further instability and economic turmoil that is detrimental to China, while further internationalisation of the conflict, for example through a direct NATO intervention, would be disastrous.

As the war in Ukraine intensifies, there naturally come the questions of whether China will further adjust its stance on Russia and whether it will do more, beyond expressing concerns, to exert influence on Russia to de-escalate and facilitate an end to the war. Given China's propensity to play on the margins of the conflict, the expectations for China to put pressure on its Russian strategic partner are not high. However, the lessons learned from Russia's miscalculations and military failures, overlapping interests with Europe to avoid escalation and advance political and diplomatic solutions to the conflict, combined with the fact that China has significant leverage over Russia, provide good reasons for China and Europe to seek engagement and potential coordination on three main areas: overcoming conflict escalation, handling the global fall-out of the war and exploring options for a negotiated peace settlement. It will inevitably be difficult to reach a pragmatic consensus on addressing the war in Ukraine and agree on cooperative measures, but given the gravity of the situation, it is important to seek overtures and redouble efforts towards working together.

Recommendations

- ▶ Europe should prioritise critical crisis-management and enlist China's support to prevent the war's escalation. Both official and un-official diplomatic avenues should be pursued to achieve this, as escalation would be inevitable if Russia resorts to nuclear weapons, or NATO troops intervene. At a minimum, China should be encouraged to choose the mainstream position regarding Russia's threat of nuclear weapons. This could take the form of an unequivocal statement by China condemning the nuclear rhetoric, although a broader mediation should not be dismissed. If the right combination of incentives ([Kurtenbach et al. 2022](#)) – including a revival of the stalled negotiations on the ratifications of the CAI agreement – was presented, Chinese leaders could be persuaded to play a greater role in peacemaking. Josep Borrell stated in an interview in March 2022 that China is the only country that can effectively mediate in this war ([Suanzes 2022](#)), and this assessment remains substantially valid. The mounting global crisis and threats of nuclear war add further urgency to re-explore China's mediation role; even without acting in an official capacity, China could still pressure Russia to end, or at least de-escalate, the war. Such a role would make a contribution to maintaining world peace that is worthy of a global power, with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. It would likely improve the current state of Sino-European relations and also better the chances to advance dialogue on other contentious issues.
- ▶ A second priority is cooperation in mitigating the wider global fall-out of the war, including overcoming strained global resources and the growing risk of food insecurity. Joint actions could include commitments to provide life-saving food assistance, for example through the World Food Program and UN channels to vulnerable populations in Africa and other regions of concern. This is an area that would respond to immediate humanitarian needs, while also acting as a trust and confidence building measure for broader cooperation in other areas.

- ▶ Regardless of if China and Europe manage to cooperate in the short-term, or if China encourages de-escalation through leverage over Russia, China's involvement in a long-term settlement of the conflict in Ukraine is inevitable. This is particularly true if a United Nations Security Council resolution, or any parallel mechanism, creates an international framework for negotiations and commitments by Russia, Ukraine and relevant third-party states. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council with a close relationship to Russia, China will be involved in efforts, including consultations, roadmaps for a peaceful settlement, key negotiations, and the necessary security assurances and post-conflict reconstruction pledges. This may eventually lead to a geopolitical agreement ([Bell 2022](#)). It would entail a new security order in Europe where a range of different and powerful actors all have a stake, despite their disagreements with each other. Whilst the most difficult area of peacemaking, forward-looking diplomacy requires preparing for such an eventuality. In addition to contributing to the creation of an international environment that is conducive for conflict resolution and the emergence of a final geopolitical agreement, Europe-China dialogue would also help address design options for such an agreement and what its content might be.
- ▶ There are options for strengthening communication and dialogue between Europe and China on the war in Ukraine, at various diplomatic and political levels. These include bilateral government consultations and visits to China by European political leaders, and EU-China exchanges, in particular the annual EU-China strategic dialogue. Seeking overtures and pragmatic cooperation with China on addressing the war in Ukraine does not mean that Europe would "lose its way" ([Rühlig 2022](#)) and renounce a principled approach. Instead, acknowledgement of the need to insulate China-European dialogue on Ukraine from divergences on a number of issues presents an opportunity for both parties to contribute to manage and end the most acute security crisis in Europe since the Second World War.

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