



UKRAINE: CHINA'S "ROCK-SOLID" PRO-RUSSIA NARRATIVE

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FRANÇOIS GODEMENT

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"Can you help me fight your friend so that I can concentrate on fighting you later?" – Liu Xin,¹ CGTN (Chinese state television) journalist, March 19, 2022

"The current state of affairs is constantly changing, and it remains to be seen how the situation in Ukraine will develop." – Feng Zhongping, Director of Institute of European Studies at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and former Vice-President of China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), March 4, 2022

INTRODUCTION

Media and published views are only a proxy for what China's leaders think. As Xi Jinping likes to recall, the press has a duty to educate the people along lines that the CCP sets. Yet, as the last decade has shown, it has become much harder to publish expert views on international relations that diverge from CCP lines. If anything, the Ukraine conflict is no exception, with large elements of convergence among literally all published analyses and opinions.

Yet there are also nuances and different accents, sometimes even within the same writing. **The messaging has shifted from the days immediately preceding the invasion of Ukraine on February 24 and three to four weeks later**, where our source collection for this special issue of *China Trends* ends. This is not happening in a single direction; the tone against the United States has sometimes radicalized. But there are also realistic doubts about the outcome of Russia's enterprise.

What has happened, of course, is that the situation in Ukraine has become more difficult to ascertain. There had been little anticipation – in China as elsewhere – of the Ukrainian and Western responses in the first place. On the eve of

ABOUT

China Trends seeks understanding of China from Chinese language sources. In an era where the international news cycle is often about China, having a reality check on Chinese expressions often provides for more in-depth analysis of the logic at work in policies, and needed information about policy debates where they exist. China Trends is a quarterly publication by Institut Montaigne's Asia program, with each issue focusing on a single theme.



the invasion, Gu Zuhua, a Taiwan affairs cadre from the Shanghai municipality, drew early, and possibly premature, lessons for China and the Taiwan issue. He claimed the two cases to be interlinked and asserted: “we should make good use of military force, and strengthen the anti-independence and pro-unification momentum (善用军事力量, 强化反“独”促统大势)”;² “we should have the will and determination to dare to fight (敢于战斗的意志和决心).”² Eleven days later, Feng Zhongping³, former Vice-President of China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), China’s best-informed think tank, dryly noted: “the current state of affairs is constantly changing, and it remains to be seen how the situation in Ukraine will develop.”

As the weeks went by, euphemisms about the “situation” or the “crisis” have given way to mentions of the “abyss” or the “tragedy” that Ukraine is descending into. The term “war” is no longer taboo. Although from the start there were different levels of accusations against the United States, there are now different policy prescriptions for China to follow in some of the comments. The strong opinion by Shanghai political scientist Hu Wei, made on March 5 and translated with his authorization by the US-based Carter Center on March 12⁴, remains, as far as we know, an exception that has quickly been censored in China. Yet his views on Putin’s failed blitzkrieg and his realist judgment that “China should rejoice with and even support Putin, but only if Russia does not fall” ring like a useful warning a few weeks later.

From the beginning of the war until now, our sources exhibit an element of continuity in assessing the situation in Ukraine and its gravity. The conflict is not about Ukraine; it is about the wider security order and balance of power. This is interesting, as China’s public diplomacy pronouncements generally underplayed the scale of the event: but as we shall see, this was largely to obfuscate the fact that one party – Putin’s Russia – was launching the largest military conflict on the European continent since World War II. On February 20, CICIR analyst Han Liqun notes that “**in order to safeguard national security, Russia does not hesitate to use all means at its disposal and break with convention** (为维护国家安全, 俄罗斯不惜运用一切手腕, 不惜打破常规).”⁵ On March 17, Huang Jing,⁶ Distinguished Professor at Shanghai International Studies University, claimed that: “Russia, with its crushing military superiority, should be able to take control of the situation and thus achieve its basic goal of dismantling Ukraine, severing its military power and cutting off its path to NATO membership.” The fact that published views in China did not hide the violence of Russia’s actions shows that for its part, Chinese diplomacy merely held up some “*éléments de langage*”, as they are often called at the Quai d’Orsay, to avoid taking an obvious stance on the international scene. China, of course, parted way from Russia at the United Nations Security Council on February 25, and in the General Assembly, on a resolution to end the war. Yet, on March 23, it was the only member of the Security Council that supported a cynical resolution⁷ introduced by Russia that advocated humanitarian corridors and denounced violence against civilians without mentioning Russia’s own role. China has opposed each and every sanction⁸ taken against Russia and even their principle.

“The current crisis has two racing cars rushing towards each other, that wait for the other side to turn the steering wheel first.”

Several views underline the gravity of the situation and the risk of escalation. **One author sees it as a case of game of chicken: “The current crisis has two racing cars rushing towards each other, that wait for the other side to turn the steering wheel first (双方像两台急速冲向对方的赛车, 就看哪一方先撑不住转动方向盘).”⁹**

1. Liu Xiu, Tweeted on March 19, 2022, <http://archive.today/sosM1>

2. Ji Yixin, “Summary | Seminar on The Evolution of the Taiwan Strait Situation and Countermeasures under the US-Russia-Ukraine Standoff (综述 | “美俄乌冲突下台海局势演变与对策”研讨会)”, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), February 21, 2022, <http://archive.today/bB5XF>

3. Feng Zhongping, currently Director of Institute of European Studies at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS); Feng Zhongping, “Can Europe be safe in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict? (俄乌冲突之下, 欧洲焉能安然?)”, *Cisnet*, March 04, 2022, <http://archive.today/VURAc>

4. Hu Wei, “Possible Outcomes of the Russo-Ukrainian War and China’s Choice”, US-China perception monitor, March 12, 2022, <https://uscnpm.org/2022/03/12/hu-wei-russia-ukraine-war-china-choice/>

5. Han Liqun, “The Ukraine Crisis and the Collision of Three Security Concepts (乌克兰危机与三种安全观的碰撞)”, *China-US Focus*, February 20, 2022, <http://archive.today/6MsPZ>

6. Huang Jing, currently with Shanghai’s International Studies University (SISU) and Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU), is a Sino-American scholar whose permanent residency in Singapore was revoked in 2017, on grounds of being “an agent of influence of a foreign country” according to the Singapore government; Huang Jing, “The Opportunities, Challenges and Choices Brought to China by the Russian-Ukrainian War (俄乌战争给中国带来的机遇、挑战与选择)”, *Cisnet*, March 17, 2022, <http://archive.today/QnNYn>

7. “Ukraine: Vote on Draft Humanitarian Resolution”, Security Council Report, March 23, 2022, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2022/03/ukraine-vote-on-draft-humanitarian-resolution.php>

8. For a timeline of key developments of Ukraine war, see Georgina Wright, Cécilia Vidotto Labastie, “Timeline: European response to the war in Ukraine”, Institut Montaigne, March 23, 2022, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/ukraine-russie-remonter-le-temps-du-conflict>

9. Dong Chunling, “Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Dual Security Dilemma and China’s Strategic Choice (俄乌冲突: 双重安全困境及中国的战略选择)”, *China-US Focus*, March 23, 2022, <http://archive.today/4oluT>

In fact, several experts do not hesitate to outline the risks of a nuclear conflict. In one case on March 21, Zhu Feng¹⁰, one of the best known America hands in Chinese academia, even interpreted Putin's announcement to place nuclear forces in a state of "readiness" as an actual threat of use of force: "Russia has already displayed its determination to launch a nuclear strike if the United States and NATO countries intervene."

THE INDIRECT JUSTIFICATION OF RUSSIA'S INVASION

There are recurring elements dealing with the "situation" or the "crisis" in almost every text. Yet ever since 2008, Russia's military actions are never directly described. The attack against Georgia is never mentioned. Crimea is only mentioned in the context of a referendum where the outcome decided that it belonged to Russia. Any sort of Russian military support for the separatists in Luhansk and Donetsk goes unmentioned. One view¹¹ even declares that "the armed forces of Eastern Ukraine declared a state of emergency on February 21"; another¹² repeats on February 22 Russian allegations about "Ukraine's initiative to launch an offensive into pro-Russian Eastern Ukraine after Russia has repeatedly said it wants to withdraw its forces." **The same author blames "Biden's fantasy and imagination about Russia's invasion of Ukraine."** "The crisis was sparked by US President Joe Biden's claim that, according to intelligence, Russia is stockpiling heavy troops on the Russian-Ukrainian border and will soon invade Ukraine."

So, Russia didn't start the war. And yet, our sources find ample justification from the past to warrant Russia starting a conflict. The first, of course, is NATO's five successive enlargements to the East and broken promises to Russia over the last three decades.

Chinese sources acknowledge Russia's feeling of insecurity. "Russia's military actions seem sudden, but they are not in reality" (看似突然, 实则不然), notes Feng Zhongping. According to Zheng Yongnian¹³ on March 21, "NATO is the most typical case of 'absolute power and absolute corruption (绝对权力, 绝对腐败)' in international politics." It is indeed important to note that **in Chinese writings, NATO, the US, and the West are often used interchangeably, with NATO seen as a puppet of the US and the West seen as led by the US.** CICIR's Han Liqun again: "Whether it is Ukraine, Germany, France, or the whole NATO, they are all tools for the US to preserve the security of the system. The US push for NATO's eastward expansion, ignoring Russia's security concerns, and using Ukraine as 'cannon fodder (炮灰)' are all the result of systemic considerations, rather than purely about protecting Europe or containing Russia." On March 20, the PLA Daily's Jun Sheng denounces the "despicable" role of the US in the Ukraine crisis, and sees the crisis in Ukraine as "a typical example of the US ganging up to engage in 'small circles' and undermining regional security and stability (拉帮结伙, 搅乱地区和平稳定的祸水)."¹⁴

Indeed, many views draw a parallel between NATO's eastward expansion and US policy and movements in the Asia-Pacific, which they describe as another push by NATO. The moves are most comprehensively described in a Global Times paper¹⁵ and also by Zheng Yongnian:¹⁶ "The Bush administration formulated a neoconservative policy toward China right after it took office in 2001.

"NATO is the most typical case of 'absolute power and absolute corruption' in international politics."

10. Zhu Feng, Executive Dean of School of International Relations at Nanjing University; Zhu Feng, "US-China coordination needed to mediate the Ukraine crisis (平息乌克兰危机需要中美协调)", Cfnisnet, March 21, 2022, <http://archive.today/6jmtM>

11. Gu Zuhua, cited in "Summary | Seminar on The Evolution of the Taiwan Strait Situation and Countermeasures under the US-Russia-Ukraine Standoff (综述 | 美俄乌克兰对峙下台海局势演变与对策研讨会)", Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), February 21, 2022, <http://archive.today/bB5XF>

12. Zhou Hao, "Ukraine crisis: wrestling at the 'gate to Europe' (乌克兰危机: 角力'欧洲之门')", The Economic Observer, February 22, 2022, <http://archive.today/HZMHV>

13. Zheng Yongnian, formerly based in Singapore, is now attached to a Hong Kong university's campus in Shenzhen; Zheng Yongnian, "For China, the biggest lesson from the Russia-Ukraine conflict is that it must be more open (俄乌冲突给中国的最大启示是必须更加开放)", Cfnisnet, March 21, 2022, <http://archive.today/cnlPC>

14. Jun Sheng, "Ganging Up, the Culprit that Disturbed Regional Peace and Stability—The Despicable Role of the US on the international stage in Light of the Ukraine Crisis (拉帮结伙, 搅乱地区和平稳定的祸水—从乌克兰危机看美国在国际舞台上扮演的卑劣角色)", QSTheory, March 20, 2022, <http://archive.today/bzzxm>

15. Fan Wei, "This is the root cause of the Ukraine crisis (这才是乌克兰危机'祸根'所在)", Global Times, February 22, 2022, <http://archive.today/S3nPG>

The neoconservative policy mainly aims to establish an Asian 'mini-NATO (小苏联)' to contain China." The recent conclusion of the AUKUS agreement is cited as one such quasi-alliance.

The indictment of the West goes beyond NATO. According to Wang Yiwei,¹⁷ formerly a noted Chinese influencer in Brussels, the West's disrespect of Russia and failure to understand its red line (不知适可而止) caused today's tragedy in Ukraine. Zheng Yongnian stresses that the West has demonized Putin and the Russian people, and Wang Peng,¹⁸ Researcher at Renmin University, underlines that **"after the cold war, the West has step by step pushed Russia into a dead-end (把俄罗斯步步逼入死角)."**

This brings on occasions another argument in defense of Russia and criticism of Western actions: the "absolute security" that every country dreams of does not exist in reality.¹⁹ The only realistic goal for states is to reach shared and relative security. The argument serves to justify support for legal security guarantees, particularly no basing of troops or missiles in Eastern Europe. **It is never used in defense of Ukraine, and instead downplays the centrality of the Ukraine issue itself, except as a "buffer zone (缓冲地带)" between Russia and NATO.** Interestingly, at least one expert, Wang Peng, who lengthily recounts Russia's changes from Gorbachev and Yeltsin to Putin, subscribes to the idea of a different Putin in his first years at the helm of Russia: "In the early days of his rule, Putin was not 'anti-American,' but continued the pro-American and pro-Western line of the Yeltsin era." In short, the West created a hostile environment forcing Russia to take action to safeguard its own interests. Chen Xin, Professor at Shanghai Jiaotong University, attributes the Russian rapprochement towards China to the US hostility and isolation of Russia.²⁰ Xu Bu, President of the China Institute for International Studies (CIIS), concludes that Russia-Ukraine relations would not have deteriorated to such a point without the involvement of external factors.²¹

The often-repeated Chinese defense lines of the Russian invasion can also be found outside the Chinese bubble.

Interestingly, **some of our sources recount the past arguments of American realists to back the criticism towards NATO enlargement.** For example, Zheng Yongnian quotes George Kennan's 1998 reaction²² to the US Senate's ratification of NATO expansion: "This expansion would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves."

Wang Peng uses Henry Kissinger's 2014 warning²³ in the event of the Crimean crisis as an example to deplore that **"neo-conservatives, opportunists and 'democratic' fundamentalists in the West never learn from history** to improve their own diplomatic strategies and governance practices, but rather see every possible opportunity to suppress their opponents and expand their power." And more recently,²⁴ Jack Matlock's:²⁵ "NATO expansion was the most profound strategic blunder made since the end of the Cold War", and John Mearsheimer's:²⁶ "The West, and especially America, is principally responsible for the crisis which began in February 2014." The list does not stop here, and it is not surprising that these references are used by Chinese sources. But they do serve as a reminder that the often-repeated Chinese defense lines of the Russian invasion can also be found outside the Chinese bubble.

As we shall see, this line of argument also brings an element that these authors do not underline but that some others will pick up: **Russia's strategic partnership with China is not unbreakable.**

16. Zheng Yongnian, "The Ukrainian War and the Restoration of World Order? (乌克兰战争与世界秩序重建?)", *The Observer*, February 26, 2022, <http://archive.today/HnNlz>

17. Wang Yiwei, "Looking at Russia-Ukraine Conflict from a millennium, century and cold war perspective, (从千年、百年、冷战维度看俄乌冲突)", Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, Renmin University of China (RDCY), March 02, 2022, <http://archive.today/EKZTH>

18. Wang Peng, "How did the US and the West increased the pressure on Russia step by step after the Cold War (冷战后美西方是如何对俄步步紧逼的)", *World Affairs*, March 16, 2022, <http://archive.today/eNb8J>

19. Ibid.

20. Chen Xin, "What does the US use of "financial nuclear weapons" against Russia teach China? (美国对俄罗斯动用"金融核武器", 对中国有何启示?)", *The Observer*, February 27, 2022, <http://archive.today/fk0ie>

21. Xu Bu, "To resolve the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the right approach must be taken (解决俄乌冲突必须对症下药)", *Aisixiang*, March 20, 2022, <http://archive.today/ZAKyy>

22. Thomas L. Friedman, "Now a Word from X", *Foreign Affairs*, May 2, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/02/opinion/foreign-affairs-now-a-word-from-x.html>

23. Henry Kissinger, "To settle the Ukraine crisis, start at the end", *Washington Post*, March 5, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9_story.html

24. Xu Bu, "To resolve the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the right approach must be taken (解决俄乌冲突必须对症下药)", *Aisixiang*, March 20, 2022, <http://archive.today/ZAKyy>

25. Jack F. Matlock Jr., "I was there: NATO and the origins of the Ukraine crisis", *Responsible Statecraft*, February 15, 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/02/15/the-origins-of-the-ukraine-crisis-and-how-conflict-can-be-avoided/>

26. "John Mearsheimer on why the West is principally responsible for the Ukrainian crisis", *The Economist*, March 19, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/11/john-mearsheimer-on-why-the-west-is-principally-responsible-for-the-ukrainian-crisis>

Beyond this narrative, **some experts go further in repeating Russian allegations. Or in making up their own.** Of particular mention should be Wang Yiwei, who explains that “Ukraine is supported by Jewish capital and American power, and even the president and ministers are dual nationals.” Yao Kun,²⁷ Deputy Director of the Institute of World Political Studies at CICIR, claimed on March 3 that “the US wants to kick Russia out of its permanent seat at the UN Security Council.” Zhu Feng wrote on March 21 that “the threat to Russia posed by the ‘Nazification’ of parts of Ukraine, its anti-Russian extremism and its eagerness to ‘Westernize’ are objective.” Among risks, he cites “a possible biological virus leak crisis in several U.S. biological laboratories in Ukraine.” Others, like Wang Yiwei, place responsibilities on the shoulders of successive Ukrainian leaders. No less a figure than Yang Guangbin, Dean of the School of International relations of Renmin University, issues an indictment of democracy: “party competition at its core provides a legitimate institutionalized platform for ethnic division.(...). The regime was supposed to be the number one priority of a country, and the voters gave it to comedian Zelensky (...) the politically immature Ukrainians were led by their utopia into the abyss.”²⁸

It is, therefore, a good move that EUvsDisinfo, the flagship project of the European External Action Service’s East StratCom Task Force, has published in Chinese an article “**debunking seven false claims spread by the Russian side (揭穿七个俄方散播的不实之说)**” about the invasion of Ukraine.²⁹

THE NUANCES AND RESERVATIONS TOWARDS RUSSIA

Nuances and reservations seem to appear in our sources from March 1. Ji Zhiye, former President of CICIR and presumably with good access to the leadership, warns about the United States’ capacity to act simultaneously on two fronts: “the United States has no scruples about exercising ‘double containment’

“The United States has no scruples about exercising ‘double containment’ in regard to China and Russia.”

in regard to China and Russia (中俄两国“双遏制”).”³⁰ **Qualifying China’s cooperative relationship with Russia, he also explains that it includes “respective counterattacks (各自反击)” on the United States, but not a “joint counterattack (联合反击)”.** This cooperative relationship has lasted because both follow the principles of “non-alignment, non-confrontation, non-targeting of third parties, and non-ideologization.” The official position of adherence to the “Four Noes” principle remains unchanged. Ji Zhiye also hints at an obstacle: both Chinese and Russian academics suffer from a lack of strategic trust in each other, and this trust deficit becomes apparent as soon as certain subtle changes in external pressure occur. The date itself is significant: one day later, on March 2, the Chinese account of a Xi-Putin call will make no mention of the February 4 joint Xi-Putin statement. On March 7, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi will describe the China-Russia relationship as “rock-solid”, yet he adds that China-Russia’s bilateral agreement does not include ‘targeting third countries.’³¹ A few others recall China’s principle of respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, but this is not coupled with mentions of Ukraine, whereas Foreign Minister Wang Yi³² has made that connection since February 19. Wang Yiwei made some significant reservations on March 14. He recalls a Chinese “Winter Olympics peace initiative at the United Nations”, which called for a ceasefire during that period, China’s friendly relations with Ukraine, and

27. Yao Kun quoted in “Why did China abstain from voting on the Ukrainian-related resolution passed at the emergency special session of the UN General Assembly? (联大紧急特别会议通过涉乌决议, 中方为何投出“弃权票”?)”, *Zhineews*, March 03, 2022, <http://archive.today/o90IB>

28. Yang Guangbin, “The Ideological Driving Forces behind the Russian-Ukrainian War and World Politics (俄乌战争与世界政治之意识形态驱动力)”, *The Observer*, March 21, 2022, <http://archive.today/VJWLB>

29. “Disinformation About Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine - Debunking Seven Russian Myths (有关俄罗斯入侵乌克兰的虚假信息 - 揭穿七个俄方散播的不实之说)”, *EUvsDisinfo*, March 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/7-myths-chinese/>

30. Ji Zhiye, “At a time of tense Russo-Ukrainian confrontation, what basic judgments should China-US-Russia relations maintain? (俄乌紧张对峙之际, 中美俄关系要守住哪些基本判断?)”, *Cfisnet*, March 01, 2022, <http://archive.today/BJPTA>

31. François Godement, “China’s Shifting Balance of Interests After the Ukraine Invasion”, *Institut Montaigne*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/chinas-shifting-balance-interests-after-ukraine-invasion>

32. Wang Yi, “All parties need to work together for peace, not create panic or hype up war”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, February 19, 2022, <http://archive.today/L2foI>

Russia's violation of security assurances given to the UN Security Council. Nonetheless, **he finds justification for Russia's retaliation to US support for Ukraine, if not for the form this retaliation has taken** (理解俄罗斯有权反制, 只是不赞同其方式).

On March 15, Qin Gang, China's ambassador to the United States, lists sovereignty and territorial integrity, including for Ukraine, before legitimate security concerns.³³ Two days later, Huang Jing finds it possible to mention two potential "black swans": **"the 'post-Putin era' will come sooner or later, and we cannot rule out the possibility that Putin's successor will make a reversal of strategic choices"**; "Once the White House changes hands in 2024, especially if a Trump-style figure is elected, a 'Nixon phenomenon' is likely to occur between the US and Russia." Under these circumstances, it is clearly becoming opportune to describe the China-Russia relationship as something less than all-weather.

One Chinese official expert went quite far on March 13. Admittedly, "Henry" Wang Huiyao, Founder and President of the Center for China and Globalization (CCG), is a key conduit to Western business elites for China's United Front Work Department (UFWD). Still, his reservations are almost on par with Hu Wei's ones expressed two weeks earlier. They deserve extensive citation: "Vladimir Putin seems to have assumed he could get a swift victory, underestimating the fierce resistance from Ukraine. (...) Russia's leader feels pushed to take increasingly extreme measures – such as what we've seen in the past few days with the Russian army's siege tactics and attacks on civilian areas. (...) Ideologically, China has common ground with both Ukraine and Russia. (...) So far, Chinese media has avoided criticism of Russia and even adopted Moscow's narrative of the war. (...) Beijing's goal would be to find a solution that gives Mr. Putin sufficient security assurances that can be presented as a win to his domestic audience while protecting Ukraine's core sovereignty and NATO's open-door policy."³⁴ **As ambiguous as they are, these last suggestions point the ambiguity in the other direction, that of a face-saving exit for Vladimir Putin.**

One can find some other reservations in discussions about US sanctions against Russia and potential effects or secondary sanctions against Chinese entities and interests. The EU is seldom mentioned in this context. **No one of our sources backs sanctions.** Wu Zhenglong, a Senior Research Fellow at the China Foundation for International Studies, labels the current sanctions as "selfish" and "self-harming (对俄制裁: 杀敌一千自损八百)".³⁵ Wei Jianguo, the former Vice-Minister of Foreign Trade and an adviser to the CCG, takes a very upright stance. "The use of sanctions is a sign that the US has exhausted all its tricks (黔驴技穷). (...) **Chinese companies can 'straighten their backs (把腰杆子挺起来)', with the state behind them, there is no need to fear the long-arm jurisdiction of any country.**"³⁶ When discussing the spillover effect of the US sanctions on China, Zhang Weiwei, Director of the China Institute at Fudan University, shows an immense level of confidence: "if China and the US go into a trade war again, no matter the scale of the war, China will win, and the US cannot afford the fight (中美贸易战再打的话, 小打小胜, 中打中胜, 大打大胜, 中国要胜, 就是美国打不起)".³⁷

"If China and the US go into a trade war again, no matter the scale of the war, China will win, and the US cannot afford the fight."

But some experts note the need to take precautions for the future: the sanction process against Russia "vividly demonstrates the tools of economic power in the hands of the US and the West, and is an important case for us to deduce and study modern-day attack and defense of the great powers."³⁸

33. Qin Gang, "Opinion: Chinese ambassador: Where we stand on Ukraine", *Washington Post*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/15/china-ambassador-us-where-we-stand-in-ukraine/>

34. Wang Huiyao, "It's Time to Offer Russia an Offramp. China Can Help With That", *The New York Times*, March 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/13/opinion/china-russia-ukraine.html>

35. Wu Zhenglong, "Sanctions against Russia: Kill a thousand, self-defeat eight hundred (对俄制裁: 杀敌一千自损八百)", *China-US Focus*, March 25, 2022, <http://archive.today/S53C5>

36. Wei Jianguo, "Poor Long-Arm Jurisdictional Intimidation Will Harm the US Itself (低级的长臂管辖恐吓会害苦美国自己)", Center for China and Globalization (CCG), March 14, 2022, <http://archive.today/NDxXS>

37. Zhang Weiwei, Jin Canrong, «This Is China» Issue n°138: Reconsidering the Ukrainian Conflict (张维为《这就是中国》第138期: 乌克兰冲突再议), *The Observer*, March 27, 2022, <http://archive.today/dXlkB>

38. Li Wei, "Content, Characteristics and Impact of US and Western Economic Sanctions against Russia Amid the Russia-Ukraine Conflict (俄乌冲突下美西方对俄经济制裁的内容、特点及影响)", *Aisixiang*, March 24, 2022, <http://archive.today/8dtwd>

Other discussions, especially from legal or business consultancy services, are far less sure of this. In fact, quite a bit of advice is given about the need for due diligence and “know your customer” processes to avoid falling inadvertently under American sanctions. **The Chinese economy is generally described as immune to direct fall-out from China-Russia trade**, and not a few analysts note potential benefits given Russia’s increased dependence. Global inflation on energy and raw commodities is a concern, but the policy advice to address this is very limited and prudent: it essentially involves providing a shield for low-income groups. Still, sanctions are an ongoing concern. Initially, some advice mentioned potential circumventing – for example, using small banks and companies that have no connecting nexus with the United States. Increasingly, a negative fall-out is mentioned – for instance in IT sales to Russia: China’s LCD and LED panels, for example, incorporate a lot of technology from countries such as Korea, with huge domination of US company Corning on the glass market.

The analysis does not place a great emphasis on China’s own Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS). It “can be built without the US-controlled SWIFT system, but the intermediate nodes are all banks”, notes Chen Xin on February 27. There is literally no mention of potentially increased gas, oil, or grain purchases beyond the Sino-Russian agreements signed on February 4, which were reputedly very advantageous to the Chinese side. One has the feeling that with the direct threats expressed by the US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan before his meeting with China’s Politburo Member and Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission Yang Jiechi on March 14, the topic is now off the radar. Again, Wang Huiyao is more optimistic than most, noting that “the prospect of growing economic ties between Moscow and Beijing, while it could pose a threat to the West, provides China with favorable leverage in potential negotiations from Putin’s perspective. As he and his country become increasingly isolated from the West, they can no longer afford to lose China.” Wang is actually implying that **if Putin suffers a very serious rout, and given China’s interest in the survival of his regime, some form of economic leverage by China would become more effective**. That is very different from attempting to counter the sanctions in a serious way.

EUROPE – THE LOSER, OR THE SWING POWER?

The war over Ukraine is largely described as a struggle across the continent; China supports Russia on the issue of legal security guarantees. But it also puts an accent on relative vs. absolute security. The question of Europe’s interests, stands, and potential leverage, is on the agenda of a number of Chinese experts. On the eve of the invasion or in its first phase, initial views gave short shrift to Europe. Not only is it subservient to NATO and the United States, but it has failed to make its mark beyond the Minsk agreements of 2014. This view is true for the European Union itself as well as for key member states. Again, CICIR’s Han Liqun has the harshest indictment: “neither the Germans, the French nor the British have any say in the Ukrainian issue (...) Europe’s overemphasis on non-traditional security issues such as climate, cyber, and counterterrorism, has failed to identify the main contradictions in national security.” This likely reflects also a long-standing pessimistic assessment at CICIR on the rise of social movements and populism across

“The EU’s defense development has always been more of a slogan than something substantive.”

Europe, weakening governments and Europe itself. Here, CICIR's former authority on Europe, Feng Zhongping, renews these pessimistic views: "the influx of refugees after the Arab Spring has accentuated social and economic problems within European countries, and populism has taken hold. With the existing problems still accumulating, the EU and most European countries are not fully prepared to deal with a new round of refugee crisis(...) European countries have not been able to reach a real consensus on common security and defense issues." For him, **strategic autonomy is a goal that will be further emphasized after the events, but it remains a long-term perspective.** Others concur, especially on Europe's limited defense potential: "the EU's defense development has always been more of a slogan than something substantive (口号大于实质)."³⁹ Therefore, Europe must rely on American security.

But the issue of European interests vs. those of the United States is a different one. The sources often refer to the United States as the only winner in this new situation – which, incidentally, does not bode well for Russia. Among other gains, it is seen as reorganizing the transatlantic relation – and beyond – to the US's own benefit. **Europe, despite its soft power, is seen as a loser, unable to act by itself while bearing much of the brunt from the conflict** – energy, refugees, backlash from sanctions, and of course, a potential widening of the war. In the strongest of terms, Sun Chenghao, Research Associate at the Center for International Security, Tsinghua University, as well as a frequent contributor to CGTN and the Global Times, explains on March 10 that "the crisis proves that the European concept of a Sino-US 'middle way (中间道路)' is failing. Europe had hoped to stay ideologically aligned with the United States, cooperate in the economic and trade fields with China, and temporarily rely on the United States for security while seeking to increase its independent power development. The Russia-Ukraine crisis has dealt a huge blow to this design, and Europe has become the main battleground of the conflict between the West and Russia, exposing Europe's shortcomings in economy and security."⁴⁰ **For some time, Chinese public diplomacy has been asking Europe to "choose" between systemic rivalry, a notion that China rejects, and cooperation. In this regard, Sun Chenghao says that Europe can no longer afford to choose the second option.** As evidenced by the Ukraine crisis, its security reliance on the United States contradicts what China believes to be its economic interests.

As the weeks of conflict go by, some re-evaluation of Europe's role may be taking place. According to Huang Jing, **"the continuing security threat and the high cost of 'sanctions' will certainly make the conflict of interests between Europe and the United States continue to ferment** – in fact, the US-European conflict has already begun to appear (...) we should actively support the European (German and French)-led peace talks and mediation. We support the "Normandy model" – the four-nation negotiations between France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine (...) the Russian-Ukrainian war has greatly increased the strategic value of Europe." But this is a unique view. Others hardly go into more specific country analysis. Feng Zhongping distinguishes between frontline states and France & Germany, without very strong conclusions. Zheng Yongnian estimates that German rearmament will not go down kindly in France: this does seem very dated.

One should not deduce too much from the few notes of renewed interest for Europe's stand on the Ukrainian issue. **Missing, for example, is a concern for Europe's role in the sanction process, or (apart from Zheng Yongnian cited above) how much the invasion has changed the political climate in Germany.** Furthermore, there is also Chinese speculation on India's role as a neutral player. In fact, the February 4 Xi-Putin joint statement had promoted the development of cooperation in the "Russia-India-China format." A neutral or aloof attitude by India, much of Southeast Asia and Saudi Arabia may

39. "Roundtable | Ukraine Crisis: The EU Fails to Meet Its Objectives (圆桌 | 乌克兰危机: 欧盟力不从心)", *The Paper*, February 22, 2022, <http://archive.today/1bxt>

40. Sun Chenghao, "Under the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, Where Is The US - Europe Joint Effort to Control China Going? (俄乌危机之下 美欧联手制华走向何方?)", *China-US Focus*, March 10, 2022, <http://archive.today/wfzeR>

be more interesting to China. One even sees Huang Jing's speculation of the current usefulness of improving relations with Japan. However, are returned overseas Chinese like him or Zheng Yongnian relevant to leaders and insiders in the party-state? It is doubtful.

HEDGING, CHINA STYLE

As the weeks of conflict go by, a China that likely had no more insight than anyone else on the course of events is bound to make adjustments.

On capital markets, hedging against risk requires that one takes forward sell options to balance possible fluctuations from a strong buy position. This may be the key to some ambiguities and reservations in Chinese positions. As the weeks of conflict go by, a China that likely had no more insight than anyone else on the course of events is bound to make adjustments. **Reality intrudes – and**

China's media have reported some of the destruction in Ukraine, often but not always failing to indicate its authors.

Is there additional unease from the sheer illegality of Russia's actions going against the principles that China always holds forth – territorial and sovereign integrity, non-intervention, the UN Charter? **There may indeed be unease that filters through some social media, as recently reported.**⁴¹ Qin Gang, Ambassador to the United States, now explains that the "bottom line" for Sino-Russian relations is the UN Charter.

⁴¹. "Russia's invasion of Ukraine sparks fierce debate in China", *Financial Times*, March 24, 2022 <https://www.ft.com/content/a0fa2378-d7a9-42f8-97bf-299c0449e1be>

China clings to ambiguity, and should be judged by its deeds, rather than by its words: it has launched a massive cyber broadcasting of Russia's claims and fake news, for example.

But Vladimir Putin is now a hard act to follow. Had he succeeded quickly, there is no doubt China would have applied its known practice of enforced amnesia on these actions. It is most likely keeping count of which third parties follow the US and European sanctions and who reject them: a sudden visit by Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Saudi Arabia is a case in point. It now puts emphasis on what is actually its minuscule humanitarian assistance delivered to Ukraine. **Wang Huiyao blames the reluctance of the US and US allies in allowing China to play a more active role, as they view Beijing as a strategic rival.** Some experts such as Feng Zhongping express the hope that cool heads prevail. And the "cool heads" rhetoric is also used by Yao Kun to justify China's abstention at the UN Security Council on February 25: China's abstention is meant to ensure an environment that allows a political and diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis. Huang Jing believes that the best choice for China is to maintain the right to choose before the situation is completely cleared up, so it retains the power to take initiatives. Zhu Feng, the America expert, peddles some Russian allegations but also says that **the US and China must stick to "competing, but not breaking (斗而不破)."** The official Chinese account of the last Biden-Xi conversation essentially insists on guarantees the US should give regarding its China policy, without specifying what might be done in exchange.

This is a holding position designed to avoid being harmed by any outcome in Ukraine. Should Russia's position deteriorate further, we would hear more about Chinese reservations. Should Russia succeed in holding ground with some sort of ceasefire, much of Chinese leverage would be directed against sanctions and even more against those that might affect third parties.

Within Asia, China is likely to blend with those – in Southeast Asia and India – who explain this is a regional conflict in which China has no part.

In other words, China is part of the problem, given that its official ideology and authoritarian system have mutually converged with Putin's and that it has a list of potential justifications for the use of force against Taiwan. But it is not part of the solution, including at the UN Security

Council, where it is hiding behind the bush. **In a twisted way, Vladimir Putin has succeeded in one regard – relativizing China's leverage, in any direction, while he captures global attention with his risky bet of placing boots on the ground.** By contrast, China plays a long game, limiting its potential losses but not standing to gain much from the pattern of current events.

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