

China's Strategic Straddle: Analyzing Beijing's Diplomatic Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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This article examines China's diplomatic responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It argues that the war created an immediate diplomatic "trilemma" for China as it sought to balance three competing interests: alignment with Russia, adherence to core principles of Chinese foreign policy and need for stability with the United States and Europe. To manage this trilemma, China adopted a policy that I term a "strategic straddle" in which China tries to balance these competing interests at the same time. In practice, this straddle has manifested in strong rhetorical, informational and diplomatic support for Russia while, at the same time, Beijing has been very careful, to date, to avoid providing substantial material support to Russia. Maintaining this balancing act will be difficult as Russian needs grow. In relations with the United States and Europe, China has sought to put a floor under worsening relations but has had limited success doing so. The one area where China has sought strategic advantage is in its ties with the Global South, which is suffering from economic dislocations associated with the war. China has sought to use these deprivations to generate greater solidarity in resisting U.S.-led rules, norms and institutions. China's ability to maintain this straddle will be challenged the complexities of managing competing ties with these different countries, regions and institutions.

Chinese President Xi Jinping is having a bad 2022. Despite an auspicious start with China hosting the Winter Olympics in February, it has been all downhill since then – and rapidly so. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February has a lot to do with it. The war immediately created several challenges for China at a time when Xi seeks stability as he prepares for a leadership transition this fall. The Ukraine war immediately put pressure on many of China's most important external relationships. It also sparked a series of rolling economic shocks – spikes in commodity prices, supply chain disruptions, and the prospect of a major European recession – that hit the Chinese economy during a period of worsening structural fragility.

Perhaps most pointedly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine occurred a mere twenty days after Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a joint statement outlining a substantial, if not historic, strategic alignment. The proximity of the February 4 China-Russia joint statement and the February 24 invasion of Ukraine put China at the center of a major war in Europe and one of the most defining moments in global politics since the end of the Cold War. These events prompted international policymakers and commentators to focus immediately on China and ask: How will China react and what is its true position on the invasion? What do Beijing's statements and actions reveal about its strategic intentions? And what are the implications for Chinese foreign policy, U.S.-China relations, and global politics?

To address these and other questions, this article will analyze Chinese government statements and actions since the February invasion as well as the writings of Chinese commentators and scholars. To a limited degree, this analysis draws on conversations with Chinese scholars and analysts during the past several months. The article begins with a focus on the dilemmas facing China to frame the subsequent analysis. The bulk of the article then examines how Beijing has managed its competing interests in diplomacy toward the United States, Russia, Europe, the United Nations, and the developing world. The relative success and/or failure of this strategic straddle by China will have a substantial effect on the shape and contours of global politics going forward.

Conceptualizing the Straddle: China’s Diplomatic “Trilemma”

China’s diplomatic response to the Russian invasion is driven by the desire to balance three competing interests: alignment with Russia, commitment to long-standing principles in Chinese foreign policy, and China’s ties with the United States and Europe. The more China does on one, the more it undercuts at least one of the other interests. China’s desire and ability to manage this “trilemma” have directly motivated its various diplomatic behaviors since the outbreak of the war.

China’s first interest is to retain and grow its alignment with Russia amid the ignominy of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Far from a relationship of strategic convenience, the China-Russia relationship has substantial and enduring roots. It is based on a common vision of global politics focused on constraining U.S. power, common material interests surrounding trade in energy and military technology, and common values regarding the virtue of authoritarian political systems pursuing state-directed development strategies.¹ At its core, Moscow and Beijing see the United States as the main threat to both their domestic and their external stability. The personal ties between Putin and Xi serve as a lubricant of the former three drivers.²

The second major interest in China’s evolving trilemma is to maintain the perception of its commitment to protect territorial integrity and sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This is a “core interest” for China and central to the identity and, thus,

¹ Evan A. Feigenbaum, “China Faces Irreconcilable Choices on Ukraine,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 24, 2022, at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/02/24/china-faces-irreconcilable-choices-on-ukraine-pub-86515>; on military-technical issues see Demetri Sevastopulo, “US Tells Allies China Signaled Openness to Providing Russia with Military Support,” *Financial Times*, March 14, 2022.

² Interview on podcast “The History Behind Growing China-Russia Relations: A Conversation with Dr. Joseph Torigian,” ChinaPower, CSIS, Washington, DC, February 2022, at <https://www.csis.org/podcasts/chinapower/history-behind-growing-china-russia-relations-conversation-dr-joseph-torigian>; also see Joseph Torigian, “Historical Legacies and Leaders’ Worldviews: Communist Party History and Xi’s Learned (and Unlearned) Lessons,” *China Perspectives*, No. 1–2 (2018), <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/7548>

legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Xi mentioned this in his April 21, 2022 speech as one of the five pillars of his Global Security Initiative.³

The third major Chinese interest implicated in this trilemma is China's relationships with the United States and Europe. The latter are two of China's largest and most important trading partners, which China cannot afford to alienate (at least right now). Beyond China's economic stakes, Chinese strategists believe that an unstable and outwardly hostile relationship with the United States could derail China's national rejuvenation in myriad ways, including a security crisis over, for example, Taiwan. Similarly, China has long seen Europe as a swing vote in geopolitics and has sought to prevent it from overly aligning against China.

Articulating the Straddle: China's Official Rhetoric on the Russian Invasion

A starting point for understanding China's diplomatic response in 2022 is appreciating the differences compared to Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Back then, China's reaction was more neutral in both word and deed. China did not vociferously defend Russia and it abstained from all key UN votes. China also did not immediately provide economic assistance, which eventually emerged but mainly in the form of favorable investment deals for China. Also, China did not provide any military assistance in 2014. According to an analysis by Alexander Gabuev, "the [2014] crisis provided a great opportunity for Beijing to turn Russia into a junior partner in the relationship and secure many of its strategic interests."⁴

In stark contrast to 2014, China's official rhetoric has been notable for its shrill tone and anti-U.S. and anti-Western content and for the persistence of this rhetoric. From the beginning of the war, China's Foreign Ministry has refused to call it an invasion or to criticize Russia for violating another country's sovereignty, and it has consistently blamed the United States and NATO for provoking Russia and now, for prolonging the war by arming Ukraine. China has offered only the most generic calls for a negotiated solution. It has also consistently stated that it supports the UN Charter and the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity, without any acknowledgment of the obvious tensions in its position. Chinese criticism of U.S. policy – from both officials as well as state media – have been notably harsh and continue to this day.⁵

³ For a full text of the speech, see "President Xi Jinping's Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony BAF Annual Conference 2022," *China Daily*, April 21, 2022, at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202204/21/WS6260db59a310fd2b29e585e3.html>

⁴ For an assessment of China's diplomacy in 2014, see Alexander Gabuev "A 'Soft Alliance'? Russia-China Relations After the Ukraine Crisis," European Council on Foreign Relations, Policy Brief, February 2015, https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR126_-_A_Soft_Alliance_Russia-China_Relations_After_the_Ukraine_Crisis.pdf

⁵ See Paul Haenle and Sam Bresnick, "China's Ukraine Calculus Is Coming Into Focus," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 4, 2022, at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/04/china-s-ukraine-calculus-is-coming-into-focus-pub-86801>

Beginning with a cameo appearance by Ms. Hua Chunying as Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson on February 24 – temporarily taking the place of Zhao Lijian and Wang Weibin – she offered a uniquely tough criticism of the United States and NATO. When asked about the legitimacy of the Russian invasion, she referred to China being invaded by the Eight Power Allied Force in 1900 to suggest Western hypocrisy. To bring home the point, she then referenced the accidental NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Serbia in 1999 by stating “NATO still owes the Chinese people a debt of blood.” Hua concluded, “Even today, China still faces a realistic threat from the US flanked by its several allies. ...”⁶

The tone and substance of Chinese criticisms have persisted since then, with a heavy focus on the culpability of U.S. and NATO policies. Major state-media outlets, such as *People’s Daily* and *PLA Daily*, have regularly published particularly pointed and harsh critiques of the United States and NATO. Senior diplomats regularly echo these points. In a May 6 speech before an online dialogue with twenty global think tanks, First Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng said, “Basically, [the United States] wants to profit from the war and control Europe, “weaken” Russia and sustain their hegemonic power at the expense of Ukraine. So, they are killing many birds with one stone, and that explains why they keep doing it.”⁷

China’s official rhetoric has evolved in interesting ways. First, China has refused to refer to its position on the war as “neutral” but rather as “objective and impartial,” as first stated by Foreign Minister Wang Yi as early as March 7.⁸ Second, since early March, as the crisis escalated, Chinese officials and diplomats spoke of peace and negotiations in all of their meetings and calls. Yet, when a senior EU official in March floated the idea of China hosting a diplomatic mediation, Beijing very carefully avoided the issue. In March, Wang Yi outlined a six-point proposal to address the growing humanitarian crisis. Since then, Beijing has provided limited assistance once it evacuated Chinese nationals.

Third, China has assiduously avoided every opportunity to criticize Russian military actions. It did not criticize Russia in early March when its forces started attacking civilian targets in Ukraine, when Russia refused to allow humanitarian corridors out of active war zones, and when reports emerged in April about Russian military atrocities and alleged war crimes.⁹

⁶ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2022,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 24, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202202/t20220224_10645282.html

⁷ “Acting on the Global Security Initiative to Safeguard World Peace and Tranquility,” Keynote Speech by Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng at “Seeking Peace and Promoting Development: An Online Dialogue of Global Think Tanks of 20 Countries,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 6, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202205/t20220506_10682621.html

⁸ “State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 7, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220308_10649559.html

⁹ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 6, 2022, at

Fourth, beginning in mid-March, China's official rhetoric has gone on the offensive. It has focused on enumerating the threats resulting from the U.S. and allied reaction. Chinese officials and commentators started claiming that NATO now poses a threat to Asia, with some Chinese raising the prospect of an Asian NATO to turn attention to U.S. alliances in Asia.¹⁰ In his May 6 speech, Le Yucheng said, "For quite some time, the U.S. has kept flexing its muscle on China's doorstep. ... If this is not an Asia-Pacific version of NATO's eastward expansion, then what is?"¹¹

Chinese officials and commentaries have highlighted economic risks as well. In April and around the time of the Bucha revelations, Chinese commentaries in *People's Daily* started criticizing the global sanctions regime on Russia by calling it "financial terrorism" (金融恐怖主义), "economic hegemonism" (经济霸权主义), and "economic weaponization" (经济武器化).¹² Le Yucheng reinforced these themes by saying, "History has shown time and again that unilateral sanctions have never been an effective solution to any problem. They are just a tool of hegemony and power politics, always adding fuel to the fire and magnifying and complicating the existing problems."¹³

China's rhetorical posture can be summarized in this way: denial, deflection, diversion, and division. China denies that Russia caused this situation, and that China has any role. China deflects responsibility from Russia and itself, focusing on blaming U.S. policy and especially NATO expansion for provoking Russia. China is seeking to divert attention from Russia and the war by highlighting the alleged security and economic risks caused by the actions of the United States and its allies. And China seeks to create divisions between the United States and Europe as well as between the United States and its allies and partners in Asia.

Operationalizing the Straddle: China's Diplomatic Behavior

Beyond rhetoric, China's operational diplomacy in reaction to the invasion is a second layer to understanding its strategic straddle. China's actual behavior reveals, far more than the words alone, how China has sought to balance its competing interests. This section examines China's

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202204/t2022040610665019.html

¹⁰ Li Aixin and Bai Yunyi, "Russia-Ukraine Conflict Can Be Regarded as a 'Preview of US' Possible Acts in Asia," *Global Times*, March 17, 2022, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1255162.shtml>

¹¹ "Acting on the Global Security Initiative to Safeguard World Peace and Tranquility," Keynote Speech by Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng.

¹² Zhong Sheng, "将经济武器化必将反噬其身" (Weaponizing the Economy Will Cause Self-Harm), *Renmin Ribao*, April 6, 2022, at <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0406/c1002-32391987.html>

¹³ "Acting on the Global Security Initiative to Safeguard World Peace and Tranquility," Keynote Speech by Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng.

diplomacy toward the United States, Russia, the United Nations, Europe, and the developing world.

1. U.S.-China Ties

As China's most important relationship, Beijing has invested time and energy trying to stabilize ties with Washington since the invasion. It has done so with a series of discreet high-level interactions. Three weeks after the invasion, Xi sent his top diplomatic adviser and Politburo member Yang Jiechi to meet with Jake Sullivan in Rome on March 14.¹⁴ The Rome meeting was quickly followed four days later by a video meeting between presidents Biden and Xi Jinping, their second video call since November 2021 (and their third interaction since Biden's inauguration). The Chinese Foreign Minister had at least three calls with U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken since the invasion. China's ambassador to the United States Qin Gang has been particularly active, including notable initiatives, such as a March 15 article in the *Washington Post*,¹⁵ a March 20 on-camera interview on the Sunday morning news show *Face the Nation* with Margaret Brennan,¹⁶ and an April 18 piece in the online edition of *The National Interest*.¹⁷

China's diplomatic strategy is to put a floor under U.S.-China ties to prevent a rapid, substantial, or sustained deterioration as the war evolves. It has done so in several ways. First, Chinese leaders and officials have sought to deflect U.S. criticisms of China. They argue the following: (1) China knew nothing about the conflict in advance (an issue of substantial U.S. debate during the early weeks of the conflict); (2) U.S. and NATO policies provoked Russia and the U.S. needs to act to resolve this; and (3) China is committed to territorial integrity and sovereignty and a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Underlying these arguments is a deep Chinese mistrust of U.S. motives, believing the U.S. and NATO provoked Russia in order to weaken it. In the words of Le Yucheng, "Some big countries do not want to get dragged into conflicts and bring harm to themselves, so they turn small countries into their cat's paw and even use them to fight proxy wars."¹⁸

¹⁴ This special one-day meeting had been discussed since early 2022 but not scheduled until after the outbreak of the war.

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

¹⁶ Transcript: Chinese Ambassador to the U.S. Qin Gang on *Face the Nation*, March 20, 2022, at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/qin-gang-chinese-ambassador-face-the-nation-03-20-2022/>;

¹⁷ Qin Gang, "Chinese Ambassador: The Ukraine Crisis and Its Aftermath," *The National Interest*, April 18, 2022, at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/chinese-ambassador-ukraine-crisis-and-its-aftermath-201867>

¹⁸ "Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng Attends and Addresses the Fourth International Forum on Security and Strategy," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 19, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202203/t20220320_10653531.html

Second, China has carefully maneuvered to avoid becoming a target of U.S. and international sanctions. Beijing denied U.S. press reports in mid-March that it was preparing to provide – but had not yet transferred – military assistance to Russia. Chinese firms have been careful to avoid violating the international sanctions. (More on that below.) In a unique move likely taken to address mounting U.S. concerns, China appeared to adjust its Russia policy. In a March 27 TV interview, China’s U.S. ambassador stated that although there is no ceiling in China-Russia ties, it “does have a bottom line, which is the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, the international law and basic norms governing international relations. These are the guideline for China to deal with relations with any country.”¹⁹ This statement implies that China will not provide material support to Russia’s invasion, but it will actively cooperate in many other areas (i.e., “no limits” to China-Russia ties).

Third, China used the March 18 Biden-Xi meeting to create a framework to stabilize relations. Xi did so by specifying Chinese expectations of U.S. policy. In an unusually detailed meeting readout, the Chinese stated: “President Biden has just reiterated that the U.S. does not seek to have a new Cold War with China, to change China’s system, or to revitalize alliances against China, and that the U.S. does not support ‘Taiwan independence’ or intend to seek a conflict with China.”²⁰ Several Chinese scholars now refer to this summary as the new “five no’s” of America’s China policy.²¹ As an indication of the importance of this, Xi stated to Biden, “I take these remarks very seriously,” implying that Xi will hold the United States to them and perhaps link Chinese behavior to U.S. compliance with them.²²

As Beijing sought to put a floor under its deteriorating relationship with Washington, the United States sought to put a ceiling on China’s relationship with Russia to prevent Beijing from providing substantial material assistance – military and/or economic – to Russia. As of this writing, China has avoided crossing the two bright lines in U.S. policy: military assistance to Russia and *systematic* evasion of the international sanctions.²³

¹⁹ “Transcript of Ambassador Qin Gang’s Interview with ‘Talk With World Leaders’,” March 27, 2022, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dshd/202203/t20220327_10656186.htm; the Chinese language version can be found here: http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/dshd/202203/t20220327_10656182.htm

²⁰ For the official Foreign Ministry readout of the meeting, see “President Xi Jinping Has a Video Call with US President Joe Biden,” at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220319_10653207.html.

For the much shorter U.S. readout of the meeting, see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/18/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-2/>

²¹ Author’s video calls with Chinese think tank analysts and university-based scholars, March and April 2022.

²² “President Xi Jinping Has a Video Call with US President Joe Biden.”

²³ Steve Holland, Trevor Hunnicutt, and David Brunnstrom, “U.S. Relieved as China Appears to Heed Warnings on Russia,” Reuters, May 3, 2022, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-relieved-china-appears-heed-warnings-russia-2022-05-03/>

This U.S. approach has created a symmetry of sorts, between U.S. and Chinese goals. Beijing's "floor" for U.S.-China ties (based on Biden's "five no's") and Washington's "ceiling" on China-Russia cooperation appears to have created a *de facto* equilibrium in bilateral relations. How fragile this will be and what actions might trigger an unraveling remain open questions.

The one major exception to the fragile equilibrium in U.S.-China ties has been China's activities with Russia to spread disinformation about the war, and specifically about the U.S. role. China has promoted several false narratives, often copying the Kremlin's justification for the war.²⁴ However, Chinese disinformation activities are quite different from past efforts, heightening U.S. concerns. Disinformation has not only been promoted by Chinese state-run media and government-supported social-media accounts but also by Chinese diplomats and other officials, including by Foreign Ministry spokespersons. In addition, there is a growing body of evidence that Russia and China are not only conducting parallel activities but that they have joined forces to coordinate their actions to spread false information. This is a new and rapidly growing source of tensions in U.S.-China ties.²⁵

2. China-Russia Ties

Just as China's U.S. policy has involved a careful balancing act between word and deed, China's diplomatic strategy toward Russia has reflected a similar calibration, albeit in different ways. Beijing has maintained substantial rhetorical support for Russia (including with active disinformation efforts); it has sustained high-level interactions with senior Russian officials; and it has sustained high profile military exercises, albeit ones not directly related to the war. At the

²⁴ China has copied the Kremlin's justifications for the invasion, including that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was being manipulated by U.S. billionaire George Soros and President Putin's claim that he was fighting a neo-Nazi government in Kyiv. (Chinese officials have repeatedly using the term "Nazi" on Twitter.) Other common Chinese-promoted false narratives have included that the United States operates several secret biological weapons facilities in Ukraine and the killings in Bucha were staged. In a striking move of public diplomacy, the Chinese Embassy to the United States on May 2 released a 12-page document ("10 Falsehoods Spread by the U.S. on the Ukraine Issue: A Reality Check") claiming widespread U.S. disinformation on the war; however, the document mainly includes commonly discredited untruths about U.S. policy. "Falsehoods Spread by the U.S. on the Ukraine Issue: A Reality Check," website of the PRC Embassy in the United States, May 2, 2022, at http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zmgx/zxxx/202205/t20220503_10681306.htm

²⁵ "People's Republic of China Efforts to Amplify the Kremlin's Voice on Ukraine," Global Engagement Center, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC, May 2, 2022, at <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/prc-efforts-to-amplify-the-kremlins-voice-on-ukraine/>; also Elizabeth Dvoskin, "China is Russia's Most Powerful Weapon for Information Warfare," *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2022, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/04/08/russia-china-disinformation/>; and David Bandurski, "China and Russia Are Joining Forces to Spread Disinformation," Brookings Institution, March 11, 2022, at <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/china-and-russia-are-joining-forces-to-spread-disinformation/>

same time, China has also signaled some limits to its diplomatic and material assistance to Russia, as reflected in its UN activities and its sanctions compliance.

The day after the invasion and in a curious move, Xi held a call with President Putin (this has been their only known call since invasion). Chinese support and sympathy was evident. In the Chinese readout of the call, Xi called the invasion a “special military operation,” using Putin’s preferred term. In offering his support for Russia, Xi stated that it is “important to...take seriously and respect the reasonable security concerns of all countries and reach a balanced, effective and sustainable European security mechanism through negotiation.” Xi said this in response to Putin’s claim that NATO’s “continued military deployment eastward has challenged Russia’s strategic red line.” In the call, Xi did restate China’s commitment to territorial integrity and sovereignty and the UN Charter.

With that baseline, China has sustained a consistent pace of meetings with Russian officials and has used them to reiterate its strong support for Moscow. In late March, about a month into the war, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, for the first time since the invasion; interestingly, he did so not in Beijing but in Anhui province on the margins of a meeting among several foreign ministers related to Afghanistan. Wang Yi could not have been more positive. He stated, “China-Russia relations have withstood the new test of an evolving international landscape, remained on the right course, and shown resilient development momentum. Both sides are more determined to develop bilateral relations and more confident in advancing cooperation in various fields.” Indeed, he stated the two sides shared a determination “to take China-Russian ties to a higher level.”²⁶ Wang reiterated China’s support for resolving the Ukraine crisis through dialogue, but he also acknowledged Russia’s “legitimate” security concerns stemming from a “Cold War mentality and group confrontation.”²⁷

Some twenty days later in mid-April and as Russian atrocities were becoming more public, Executive Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng – a potential successor to Wang Yi – met with Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Ivanovich Denisov in Beijing. As reports of Russian targeting of civilians and Russian atrocities at Bucha were emerging, Le Yucheng outlined an ambitious future for the relationship. Le began the meeting by touting a 30 percent increase in China-Russia trade in the first quarter of 2022, and then he encouraged Denisov by stating, “No matter how the international landscape may change, China will continue to strengthen strategic coordination with Russia for win-win cooperation, jointly safeguard the common interests of the two countries and promote the building of a new type of international relations and a community

²⁶ “Wang Yi Holds Talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 30, 2022, at

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220331_10658029.html

²⁷ Ibid.

with a shared future for mankind.”²⁸ Ukraine or the war were not mentioned in the Chinese readout of the meeting.

In a further sign of the value China assigns to the relationship, Politburo Standing Committee member Li Zhanshu hosted a video meeting on April 15 with his Russian counterpart, Valentina Matviyenko, speaker of the Russian Federation Council of the Federal Assembly. A noted Xi Jinping confidant and third ranking in the CCP, Li knows Russia well from when he previously served as Xi’s special envoy. This meeting constituted the highest bilateral exchange since the war began.

Li was robust in his affirmation of Sino-Russian ties, including by using a new formulation. He highlighted China’s commitment to the Putin-Xi leadership consensus (共识), known as “the four firmly support each other” (四个相互坚定支持).²⁹ Li then called for both sides “to constantly consolidate and develop” their strategic partnership. He referred to China-Russia relations as “mature, tenacious and stable with strong endogenous power and independent value” (成熟, 坚韧, 稳定, 具有强大的内生动力和独立价值). This formulation had not previously been used in its entirety, at least in public.³⁰ Based on Chinese press accounts of the meeting, Li did not mention Ukraine or the war. He did not reiterate China’s commitment to territorial integrity and sovereignty, but he did reaffirm the old line that Sino-Russian relations were based on non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-targeting of third parties. After the meeting, Li Zhanshu accepted the Russian “Friendship Medal” from Matviyenko.³¹

In a notable move, in late May and during a meeting in Tokyo among the leaders of the U.S., Japan, Australia and India, China and Russia flew a joint strategic bomber patrol into the Sea of Japan. The exercise, a first since the invasion, involved two Chinese warplane and four Russian ones. According to U.S. press reports, Chinese naval vessels likely took part in the joint exercise as well. This was the fourth joint bomber exercise around Japan since 2018 but the timing of this

²⁸ “Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng Meets with Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Ivanovich Denisov,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 19, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202204/t20220419_10669789.html

²⁹ This idea refers to “supporting each other in safeguarding the interests of sovereignty, security, and development, and always adhering to the principle of friendship between generations and win-win cooperation.” See “栗战书同俄罗斯联邦委员会主席马特维延科举行会谈” (Li Zhanshu Holds Talks with Chairman of the Russian Federation Council Speaker Matviyenko), *Renmin ribao*, April 16, 2022, at http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-04/16/nw.D110000renmrb_20220416_5-01.htm

³⁰ This phrase appears to be a combination of one that Foreign Minister Wang Yi used in a meeting with Foreign Minister Lavrov in March 2019 and a phrase that Xi Jinping used in a phone call with Putin in December 2020. The former can be found at <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/wjb/wjbz/xghd/t1663017.shtml> and the latter can be found at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/gjldrhd_674881/202012/t20201228_7733053.shtml

³¹ “Li Zhanshu Holds Talks with Chairman of the Russian Federation Council Speaker Matviyenko.”

one - during a meeting of the leaders of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue - suggested an effort by Beijing and Moscow to signal solidarity and resistance to the Quad. As the first military exercise since February, this action offers some indication of the type of activities China will conduct under its modified policy of “no ceiling” but also a bottom-line.³²

3. China’s UN Diplomacy

In contrast to China’s pattern of consistent rhetorical support for Russia, China’s defense of Russia in the United Nations and UN organizations has been more tepid. China has been exceptionally careful in all the relevant UN votes by avoiding directly backing Russia and finding support in numbers.

As summarized in Chart 1 below, among the seven key UN votes since the war began (as of this writing), China abstained in five of them and supported Russia in only two (and only one of these was substantive). Among China’s abstentions included some meaningful ones that put a distance between Beijing and Moscow. China abstained in the first two UN Security Council (UNSC) votes on the war. The first condemned Russia for the invasion (which Russia vetoed) and the second called for a UN General Assembly (UNGA) emergency special session on Ukraine. China then abstained in the actual UNGA vote on the latter, along with thirty-four other countries. China notably also abstained on the UN Human Rights Council vote to create a commission of inquiry into Russian atrocities; only Russia and Eritrea voted “no” on that action, which ultimately passed. China’s one meaningful “no” vote in support of Russia (along with twenty-three other countries) was the April 7 UNGA action to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council, which passed.

Beyond the UN, China has been supportive of Russia not being excluded from attending the G-20 in Bali, Indonesia, in November. The United States, Australia, and Ukraine have publicly encouraged Indonesia, the G20 chair this year, to exclude Russia. In response, China has heaped diplomatic pressure on Jakarta to include Russia. In late March, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in a meeting with his Indonesian counterpart in China, called for the G20 not to be politicized and not to be divided. As a sign of how important this is to China, Xi Jinping then called Indonesian President Joko Widodo to say that the G20 summit is not an appropriate platform to discuss political security issues such as Ukraine. China’s efforts appear to have been effective. Indonesia’s president announced in late April that both Presidents Putin and Zelensky were invited to attend the G20 this year. To date, only Putin has accepted. (Unlike Russia, Ukraine is not a permanent member of the G20.)

Table 1: China’s Ukraine-related votes at the United Nations

Date	Title	China’s Vote	Voting summary	Status
February 25, 2022	UNSCR 155: Condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine	Abstention	Yes: 11 No: 1 (Russia) Abstain: 3 (China, India, UAE)	Vetoed

³² Edward Wong, “Russia and China Held Military Exercise in East Asia as Biden Visited,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2022, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/24/us/politics/russia-china-bombers-biden.html>

February 27, 2022	UNSCR 2623 (procedural): On convening an emergency special session of the General Assembly on Ukraine	Abstention	Yes: 11 No: 1 (Russia) Abstain: 3 (China India, UAE)	Adopted ³³
March 2, 2022	UNGA Resolution: Russian aggression against Ukraine	Abstention	Yes: 141 No: 5 Abstain: 35 (China) Non-Voting: 12	Adopted
March 4, 2022	UN Human Rights Council: Establish a commission of inquiry on Russian war crimes	Abstention	Yes: 32 No: 2 (Russia and Eritrea) Abstain: 13 (China)	Adopted
March 23, 2022	UNSC 231: Russia-sponsored resolution on Ukraine's humanitarian situation	Yes	Yes: 2 (China) No: 0 Abstain: 13	Not adopted
March 24, 2022	UNGA: Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine	Abstention	Yes: 140 No: 5 Abstain: 38 (China) Non-Voting: 10	Adopted
April 7, 2022	UNGA: Suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council	No	Yes: 93 No: 24 (China) Abstain: 58 Non-Voting: 18	Adopted

4. China and the International Sanctions

To date, China's approach to the sanctions has two dimensions: ardent rhetorical opposition and careful compliance. China opposed international sanctions on Russia from the very beginning of the war.³⁴ Foreign Minister Wang Yi has said multiple times, "China always opposes the use of sanctions to solve problems, and even more opposes unilateral sanctions that have no basis in international law, which will undermine international rules and bring harm to the people's

³³ The procedural resolution precludes the use of a veto by the Council's permanent members; for a fulsome explanation of this specific UNSC resolution, see <https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/sc14809.doc.htm>.

The Security Council had last called for convening an emergency special session of the General Assembly in 1982 with regard to the situation involving Syria and Israel, and in 1980, after the outbreak of the Soviet-Afghan war, when the former Soviet Union vetoed a draft resolution, leading members to invoke General Assembly resolution 377A(V), "Uniting for Peace," adopted in 1950.

³⁴ Norman Eisen, Aaron Klein, Mario Picon, Robin J. Lewis, Lilly Blumenthal, Scott Johnston, and Charlie Loudon, *The Brookings Sanctions Tracker*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, April 2022, at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-brookings-sanctions-tracker/>

livelihood of all countries.”³⁵ Guo Shuqing, China’s chief banking and insurance regulator, went further in stating in early March that China “will not participate in such sanctions, and we will continue to maintain normal economic, trade and financial exchanges with relevant parties.”³⁶

Rhetoric aside, Chinese entities – both state-owned and private – have made a variety of different decisions about reducing operations in Russia. As of this writing, U.S. officials have stated publicly that they see no evidence of “systematic violations” of the economic sanctions by China.³⁷ The following categories of Chinese actions are based on a Yale School of Management database and press reports.³⁸

- Thirty-nine Chinese firms are maintaining business as usual in Russia, earning them a grade of “F” from the Yale database. Several high-profile names on this list include: Agricultural Bank of China, Alibaba, ANT Group, Didi Chuxing, Lenovo, SMIC, UnionPay, Tencent, among others. Of the 206 global companies in this category, China is the largest single country as of late May 2022.
- Six Chinese entities are holding off on new investments. They are: Binance, Huawei, and UnionPay, as well as three large state-owned firms – CNOOC, PetroChina, and Sinochem.
- One Chinese firm, Sinopec, is scaling back major business operations while continuing other operations. It alone has suspended \$500 million worth of new investments. Sinopec is one of 130 global companies in this category.
- Four Chinese entities have suspended operations: the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Bank of China, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), and New Development Bank. The total number of entities in this category is 413.
- One Chinese firm has departed Russia: DJI, the drone technology company. There are 318 companies in this category.

There continue to be rumors and concerns about potential future violations. According to recent press reports, CNOOC, CNPC, and Sinopec are negotiating to buy Shell's 27.5 percent

³⁵ “Wang Yi Speaks with Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares Bueno on the Phone,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 15, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220315_10651843.html

³⁶ “China Won’t Take Part in Western Financial Sanctions on Russia: Bank Regulator Chief,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 2, 2022, at <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-03-02/card/china-won-t-take-part-in-western-financial-sanctions-on-russia-bank-regulator-chief-uWcY1AvqXs5ssr2057HA>

³⁷ Holland, Hunnicutt, and Brunnstrom, “U.S. Relieved as China Appears to Heed Warnings on Russia.”

³⁸ The Yale database can be found at <https://som.yale.edu/story/2022/almost-1000-companies-have-curtailed-operations-russia-some-remain>

stake in the Sakhalin-2 liquefied natural gas venture in Russia.³⁹ There are also reports that unnamed independent Chinese refiners, or “teapots,” may be using under-the-table schemes to continue to purchase Russian oil through the Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean (EPSO) pipeline.⁴⁰ Similarly, China’s future use of small regional banks with no connection to U.S. dollar transactions to circumvent the sanctions is a persistent U.S. concern.

5. China-Europe Ties

China’s relations with Europe – and especially Europe’s strategic orientation toward China – have been a top diplomatic priority since the invasion. China’s goals have been twofold: (1) to prevent a major and sustained deterioration in relations and to reorient ties back toward trade, investment, and climate, and (2) to prevent European countries and the European Union (EU) from aligning against China. To do so, China launched high-level diplomatic meetings with a flurry of key European policymakers and EU leaders, including those from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

After the war broke out in late February, Wang Yi had phone calls with his French, British, German, and EU counterparts – which constitute the core group that China is focusing on in its European diplomacy. In those early days, Wang Yi put forward a five-point proposal, largely a holding action, to highlight China’s principled positions. In the proposal, it did call for a “balanced, effective and sustainable European security mechanism,” which China still references today. This benign- sounding formulation means a reduced role for NATO in Europe.⁴¹

Two weeks later, and as its ties with Europe deteriorated, China upped the ante. Xi arranged a virtual summit on March 8 with both French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. He then separately had a phone call with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. As the situation in Ukraine worsened throughout March, and amid a variety of meetings and calls between Wang Yi and his core European counterparts, the next big moment came with the annual EU-China Summit on April 1. This was the first such summit since June 2020 and the first time Xi joined Premier Li Keqiang at the summit to meet with European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (and their top

³⁹ “China Energy Giants in Talks for Shell’s Russian Gas Stake,” *Bloomberg News*, April 22, 2022, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-21/china-state-energy-giants-in-talks-for-shell-s-russian-gas-stake>

⁴⁰ Chen Aizhu and Florence Tan, “Exclusive: China State Refiners Shun New Russian Oil Trades, Teapots Fly Under Radar,” *Reuters*, April 6, 2022, at <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/exclusive-china-state-refiners-shun-new-russian-oil-trades-teapots-fly-under-2022-04-06/>

⁴¹ This benign-sounding formulation means a reduced focus on NATO as an institution and NATO’s reduced geographic footprint in the region. “Wang Yi Expounds China's Five-Point Position on the Current Ukraine Issue,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 26, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202202/t20220226_10645855.html

advisers). China also reached out to CEE countries by sending two delegations to the region.⁴² Xi hosted a video meeting with German Chancellor Scholz on May 9 and had a call with French President Macron on May 10.⁴³ China will likely continue this pace of high-level diplomacy.

In all of these meetings, China's strategy toward Europe has been multifaceted. It has sought to downplay China's critique of NATO and U.S. policy, to emphasize China's respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, to reiterate China's priority for humanitarian support and a negotiated solution, to call for maximum restraint "by all sides," and, of course, to call for a return to better relations with Europe, focusing on trade, investment, and climate change. In the first month of the war, Chinese diplomats were relieved when a senior EU official floated the idea of China mediating a peaceful outcome.⁴⁴ Ultimately, China never accepted the proposal, and EU interest in it quickly faded.

Chinese officials also conveyed subtle but unmistakable criticisms of Europe. They represent (1) a call for Europe to appreciate that "the legitimate security concerns of all countries must be taken seriously," reflecting sympathy for Russian concerns; (2) a call for China and Europe to "work together to reduce the negative impact of the crisis," which means reducing the severity of the sanctions, and (3) calls for Europe to uphold its "strategic autonomy," which is a clear message not to align with Washington. Xi was unusually explicit about this at the EU-China Summit when he stated that Europe should "form its own perception of China, adopt an independent China policy, and work with China for the steady and sustained growth of China-EU relations."⁴⁵

⁴² In mid-April, the Foreign Ministry sent its Special Councilor for Central and Eastern Europe, Ms. Huo Yuzhen, to eight countries in the region tasked with "eliminating misunderstandings regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict" and discussing ideas that could reignite the countries' interest in "pragmatic cooperation linked to the Belt and Road Initiative. This delegation visited seven countries: Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Poland, and Latvia. China then sent a separate delegation to Greece and Albania, led by former ambassador to Finland and the Czech Republic, Ma Keqing. See Grzegorz Stec, "Can China Win Back Central and Eastern European States?" Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), MERICS Briefs: MERICS Europe China 360, May 5, 2022, at <https://merics.org/en/merics-briefs/china-cee-relations-xinhua-interviews-kuleba-and-lavrov-uk-china-relations>

⁴³ "President Xi Jinping Has a Virtual Meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 9, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202205/t20220509_10683558.html and "President Xi Jinping Speaks with French President Emmanuel Macron on Phone," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 10, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202205/t20220510_10684071.html

⁴⁴ Kevin Rudd, "Don't Count on China to Mediate the War in Ukraine," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2022, at https://www.wsj.com/articles/dont-count-on-china-mediate-ukraine-war-russia-putin-talks-negotiation-xi-jinping-taiwan-nato-11647376630?st=33o5yfnifyp6mmn&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink

⁴⁵ It is curious that the Foreign Ministry provided a separate, second readout of Xi's meeting with EU leaders. "Xi Jinping: China and the EU Should Add Stabilizing Factors to a Turbulent

China's diplomacy toward Europe shows little signs of success and increasing signs of being counterproductive. The April 1 summit did not produce a joint statement or any concrete outcomes. The EU's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, said the summit was a "dialogue of the deaf," given China's reluctance to discuss Ukraine. EU officials were particularly frustrated by Chinese comments that it was a U.S. proxy. Borrell said, "We condemn Russian aggression against Ukraine and support this country's sovereignty, democracy, not because we follow the U.S. blindly, as sometimes China suggests, but because it is our position ... this was an important message for the Chinese leadership to hear."⁴⁶ China fared no better in Central and Eastern Europe where interest in cooperation with China is fading and concerns about China are growing. For example, China cannot find any country to host the ten-year anniversary of the 16+1 meeting.⁴⁷ As a further indication of the European reaction, after the April summit several European leaders and the EU launched a flurry of high-level diplomacy with India and Japan, including a new defense agreement between the UK and Japan. The new German Chancellor Scholz made a political statement by traveling to only Japan for his first trip to Asia.⁴⁸

6. China, the BRICS, and the Global South

Whereas China's post-invasion diplomacy toward the United States, Russia, and Europe has been largely defensive in nature, China's diplomacy toward the developing world has been focused on pursuing a strategic advantage. Beijing quickly noticed the neutrality of much of the Global South and actively sought to leverage this to China's benefit. China has focused on appealing to the perceptions and interests of the developing countries and positioning itself as an alternative. China has done so both rhetorically and operationally.

China's gambit has several features. First, China is using the war – and especially the U.S.-led response – to highlight concerns that resonate with the developing countries. These include opposition to "group politics and bloc confrontation," opposition to "unilateral Western sanctions," support for sovereignty and the UN Charter, the governance deficits in the West, and the need for global governance reform. In particular, as the global economy faces food shortages, inflation, and supply chain disruptions, China is blaming them on "unilateral Western sanctions." Le Yucheng was explicit about this in a May speech: "... the U.S. and other Western countries

World," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 1, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202204/t20220401_10663226.html

⁴⁶ Chris Buckley and Keith Bradsher, "Faced With a Changed Europe, China Sticks to an Old Script," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2022, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/world/asia/china-europe-russia-ukraine.html>

⁴⁷ See Stec, "Can China Win Back Central and Eastern European States?"

⁴⁸ The leadership of the EU Commission visited India and then Japan; the UK Prime Minister also visited India and then hosted the Japanese Prime Minister in London and signed a new defense agreement. German Prime Minister Scholz visited Japan on his first trip to Asia and then hosted Indian Prime Minister Modi in Germany. Modi then visited Denmark and France.

have imposed sweeping sanctions on Russia, crippling an already languishing world economy and unleashing unbearable pain on developing countries.”⁴⁹

Many of these ideas were reflected in a high-profile speech by Xi Jinping on April 22 that Chinese officials call Xi’s “Global Security Initiative” (GSI).⁵⁰ Chinese officials and the media refer to it as a new and defining vision for geopolitics and they pair it with Xi’s fall 2021 “Global Development Initiative” (GDI). Beijing is now promoting both the GSI and the GDI as a fulsome offering to the developing world.

A second approach is to foster diplomatic solidarity among countries that are neutral on the war. China’s first big move on this front was Wang Yi’s March trip to India in the face of U.S. disappointment with Indian neutrality. Wang’s approach was to sidestep border issues and appeal to their common economic interests and shared views of global politics.⁵¹ China’s efforts fell flat. As Foreign Minister Jaishankur stated during the visit, “I was very honest in my discussions with the Chinese foreign minister. ...The frictions and tensions that arise from China's deployments since April 2020 cannot be reconciled with a normal relationship between the two neighbors.”⁵² Since then, India has started talks with the United States and the European powers about major arms packages, and it recently pledged to join the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) of the U.S.

Xi Jinping has been active in this effort as well, indicating its importance to Beijing. Xi held phone calls with South African President Ramaphosa in March and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in April. Calls to both had been infrequent in the past. Xi used these interactions to emphasize their common positions on Ukraine, and he called for cooperation among the BRICS countries on this and other issues.⁵³ During Xi’s phone call with Mohammed

⁴⁹ “Acting on the Global Security Initiative to Safeguard World Peace and Tranquility,” Keynote Speech by Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng.

⁵⁰ For a full text of the speech, see “Full Text: President Xi Jinping's Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of BFA Annual Conference 2022,” *China Daily*, April 21, 2022, at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202204/21/WS6260db59a310fd2b29e585e3.html>

⁵¹ “Wang Yi Holds Talks with Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 25, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220326_10656097.html and “Wang Yi Meets with Indian NSA Doval: China and India Should Stick to Long-term Perspective, Win-win Mentality and Cooperative Posture,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 25, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220326_10656095.html

⁵² Krishna N. Das and Sanjeev Miglani, “Chinese Minister Seeks Normal India Ties, Delhi Says Ease Border Tension First,” Reuters, March 25, 2022, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinese-foreign-minister-see-indian-counterpart-surprise-meeting-2022-03-25/>

⁵³ “Xi Jinping Speaks with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa on the Phone,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 18, 2022, at

bin Salman, their first in a year, Xi made a notable pitch for a closer strategic alignment, including a greater focus on energy trade.⁵⁴

A third part of China's diplomatic strategy has been to seek to reenergize the BRICS and Chinese-led regional institutions as venues to criticize U.S. policies and to promote Chinese ideas of global governance. As chair of the BRICS this year, China has been especially active on this agenda. In his comments to the BRICS Foreign Ministers' meeting in late May, Xi stated, "Facing the various risks and challenges of the day, it is more than ever important for emerging markets and developing countries to strengthen solidarity and cooperation."⁵⁵ At the same BRICS meeting, Wang Yi called for an expansion of the BRICS, perhaps sensing a unique moment in global politics to do so. Wang has raised similar concerns in his meetings with regional organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the China-Caribbean Cooperation Forum.

Managing the Straddle: The Future of Chinese Diplomacy

Whether China can sustain its strategic straddle is a core challenge – perhaps a defining one – for China's foreign relations today. There are two basic threats to doing so. One involves China deciding to take sides, likely precipitated by a crisis. The second involves a gradual dissolution of the straddle. As some countries do not align consistently with China or as China faces demands from others, China may find itself struggling on multiple fronts to maintain its middle ground among competing interests and demands.

Regarding the first problem of China taking sides (either in support of Russia or as distinctly neutral), this is a low probability outcome because of China's strong desire to avoid it. This outcome would likely require a high-impact exogenous event to force China to alter or even abandon its straddle. For example, if the United States were to move substantially closer toward Taiwan, then Beijing might react by aligning overtly with Russia, perhaps in preparation for aggression against Taiwan. A second possibility is that Beijing might overtly provide Russia with material assistance if Putin were to be on the brink of political collapse and Xi felt that Chinese aid could prevent that. Alternatively, China might choose to distance itself from

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202203/t20220319_10653471.html

⁵⁴ "Xi Jinping Speaks with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on the Phone," April 15, 2022, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202204/t20220416_10668788.html

⁵⁵ "President Xi Jinping Delivers a Video Address at the Opening Session of the BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 19, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202205/t20220519_10689497.html; also see "BRICS Countries Clarify Common Position on the Ukraine Issue," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 14, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjtb_663304/zygy_663314/gyhd_663338/202204/t20220414_10667990.html

Moscow and to be genuinely neutral if Russia were to use a nuclear weapon in Ukraine. In such an instance, the overwhelming global condemnation of Russia, especially from the Global South, would likely be too great a burden for China to carry.

Separate from a willful Chinese decision to abandon the straddle, China faces a collection of risks related to a gradual dissolution of its strategy. This could occur for at least three reasons. First, the fragile equilibrium in the U.S.-China relationship fails to hold, precipitating a deterioration in bilateral relations. Chinese suspicion of U.S. actions toward Taiwan or U.S. distrust of Chinese actions toward Russia could lead to a worsening of ties. In both the U.S. and China, domestic politics is playing a greater role in driving policy making, which could produce greater pressure to adopt more confrontational rhetoric and policies. In a climate of expanding, intensifying, and diversifying U.S.-China competition – fueled by domestic politics – it is difficult to imagine the current fragile equilibrium in U.S.-China ties holding for long.

A second risk is that Russia might need more from China. If Russia were to face mounting military challenges in Ukraine, then it might request military assistance from China. To get such aid, Russia could begin to offer heretofore inaccessible Russian military technical assistance, sweetening the deal for Beijing. This outcome appears to be more probable if China were to become less invested in U.S.-China ties or were it to believe that ties may soon deteriorate. Even more likely is the possibility that Russia may need substantial economic assistance from China as the sanctions take effect. This could require that China take more risky behavior regarding the sanctions, potentially putting Chinese firms at risk of secondary sanctions from Washington.

A third risk is that China never gains unique traction with the Global South, precipitating China's gradual isolation with Russia in a corner of global politics. China may face problems aligning on Ukraine with the developing world, which primarily lack China's tilt toward Moscow. This could deprive China of the alignment it needs to balance U.S. and European power. Notably, India will keep China at a distance; indeed, New Delhi is already leaning toward the United States and Europe. In addition, China's ideas may not gain traction with the developing world; most countries remain more attracted to trade and investment with China than to Xi's ideas for domestic and global governance. China's economic and COVID-related problems this year also call Xi's governance choices into question at the very time that he has put them forward as superior to liberalism and capitalism.

Thus, the challenges China faces in sustaining its strategic straddle on Ukraine are substantial and evolving. Maintaining the straddle will require constant attention and deft management. The challenges also come during a period of domestic uncertainty and leadership transition in China; China's top two diplomats, Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi, are slated to retire in the next year. Therefore, perhaps an equally important question is not only whether the straddle can be sustained, but, if so, as the war in Europe grinds on, whether China could even translate such a delicate and dynamic balancing act into something that can meaningfully influence the global distribution of power.

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