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UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S DIPLOMATIC STANCES VIS-À-VIS THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CRISIS

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As the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis is in flux, China's diplomatic stances and reactions vis-à-vis the Crisis are puzzling for many observers. Russia's military actions in Ukraine have sent Beijing into a diplomatic scramble. Beijing's stances and reactions vis-à-vis the crisis were mainly criticized on three fronts. First, China's refusal to condemn or even address Russia's military actions as 'invasion' undermines its long-standing diplomatic principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. China abstained from voting on a draft U.N. Security Council resolution that would have deplored Moscow's invasion of Ukraine¹. Washington blamed such a stance and reaction as irresponsible due to not actively preventing Russia from violating the universal principles of the United Nations (UN). Second, Washington suspected China had already known Russia's striking plan beforehand and was asked to provide military equipment and additional economic assistance². In other words, Russia's action is thought to be

bolstered by China³. Third, China is accused of helping Russia to spread disinformation⁴. Washington deems China and Russia are allies of misinformation agents that ruin information sources and mislead people.

In this occasional paper, we try to offer a more nuanced picture of Beijing's stances and reactions and contribute to a better understanding of why and how China acts as such. Methodologically, we draw our empirical information from official documents and news media.

Mapping China's diplomatic stances

To map China's diplomatic stances, we draw from official information from high-level officials⁵ and spokesmen⁶ and summarised China's main stances from February 2022 to date. From direct and clear answers to indirect and ambiguous ones, table 1 shows China's stances in addressing different questions on the Ukraine crisis.

Table 1: China's diplomatic stances addressing different questions on the Ukraine crisis*

	<i>Direct and clear</i>	<i>Indirect and ambiguous</i>
On the sovereignty of Ukraine	China firmly deems Ukraine as an independent sovereign state. China always obeys the rules of the UN Charter.	/

<p>On the issues of “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic” ...</p>	<p>/</p>	<p>1) China always obeys the rules and principles of the United Nations Charter.</p> <p>2) It has nothing to do with Taiwan. The United States cannot use this excuse to interfere with Chinese domestic affairs.</p>
<p>Did China know Russia’s plan beforehand?</p>	<p>No. Russia as an independent power did not need China's consent.</p>	<p>/</p>
<p>Why has China not taken effective actions to stop Russia?</p>	<p>/</p>	<p>1) Russia has its own strategic autonomy.</p> <p>2) China is neither the cause nor the direct stakeholder in the Ukraine crisis.</p> <p>3) The United States promised to bring peace to Europe but failed. Instead of forcing China to provide a possible solution, it makes better sense to ask how the U.S., Russia and Ukraine would plan to solve the problem.</p>
<p>Russia’s excuse for sending troops to Ukraine (genocide of Russian people)</p>	<p>/</p>	<p>1) The world has witnessed U.S. troops kill many innocent people in the past years.</p> <p>2) It has nothing to do with Xinjiang. People who live in Xinjiang are treated equally as elsewhere in China.</p>
<p>Will China support Russia by military methods?</p>	<p>No. Russia did not ask China for military equipment support.</p>	<p>/</p>
<p>Call on the Russian troop to leave Ukraine?</p>	<p>/</p>	<p>All the relevant parties involved should calm down and come back to the negotiation table.</p>
<p>Condemning Russia</p>	<p>/</p>	<p>1) The West has a ‘double standard’ on the issue. What did the West do when the United States bombarded the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Afghanistan? They did not condemn the United States.</p> <p>2) The Ukraine crisis has a complex historical background and complex geopolitical factors.</p> <p>3) Every country’s security concern should be taken into consideration (including both Ukraine and Russia).</p> <p>4) NATO shall not overlook Moscow's security concerns. It should not expand further to seek absolute security at the cost of threatening other countries’ security. Security should be common security that is comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable.</p>

On sanctions	China disagrees with illegal unilateral sanctions. And the sanctions on Russia should not damage China's interests.	/
Disinformation and misleading (together with Russia)	/	<p>1) It is the United States who spreads rumours and disinformation. The U.S. always blames China for supporting Russia or ruining human rights without evidence.</p> <p>2) The U.S. should provide convincing explanations of bio-laboratories which are led by the American Ministry of Defence as soon as possible and uncover all the secrets to the whole world under the framework of the United Nations.</p>
Civilians	China expressed deep sympathy for innocent Ukraine civilians. China has put forward a six-point initiative on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, and China has provided humanitarian assistance and will provide further assistance to Ukraine and other affected countries.	/

* Note: All the information is drawn from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of P. R. China and compiled by the authors.

As illustrated in the table, we find China deploys both the 'direct and clear' and 'indirect and ambiguous' approaches in addressing different questions and presenting its stances on the Ukraine crisis. We observe Beijing prefers to express its stance firmly and clearly on certain questions, while in other cases it tends to address questions indirectly and often highlights the negative role of the United States and the Western media before and during the Crisis. We will further explain this in the next section.

In addition, we find Chinese spokesmen often refer to the articles and speeches by George Kennan, Henry Kissinger, and some other scholars from the 'Western world'. One common view they shared is that the over-expansion of NATO is unwise, and it may damage the pride of Russia as a previous great power, provoking an overreaction from Putin. Beijing agrees with this view and deems the Ukraine crisis is not an independent event between Russia and Ukraine. Instead, it is also a miserable strategic mistake linked to the United States and NATO.

Repeatedly, we find Beijing clarifies China as not being a direct stakeholder in this crisis. As claimed by the Chinese spokesman, it is unjustified to blame China for not actively joining sanctions or undertaking other possible actions. The historical background and geopolitical factors of the Ukraine crisis are exceedingly complex, China is not in a proper position to judge or take part in the joint punishment. China does not support unilateral sanctions on Russia. Punishment such as sanctions won't make the Russian government surrender but ruin the daily lives and human rights of ordinary people (Russian people and people living in other countries, including Europeans). As a major power, China has its strategic autonomy and will not be forced to endorse stances or actions imposed by others.

Understanding China's diplomatic stances

To understand the mapped stances above, we need to situate China's stances in a challenging and complex environment - not Russia vs. Ukraine, but Russia vs. Ukraine plus the West and beyond. China's diplomatic

stances and reactions vis-à-vis the crisis are driven and delimited by the following intertwined internal and external conditions. Beijing needs to identify and choose the best possible approach to present its stances.

First, China's diplomatic stances are driven by its interests and preferences and confined by its longstanding foreign policy principles. When the former (interests and preferences) and the latter (foreign policy principles) are in line with each other, we observe a more direct and clear expression of stance. For instance, when asked if China regards Ukraine as an independent country, with no hesitation Beijing deems Ukraine as an independent country, and its sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected and protected according to the United Nations Charter. Because stating a clear stance to supporting Ukraine's status as independent sovereignty is not in conflict with China's core interests.

In parallel, when the core national interests and the foreign policy principles have tensions, we observe a more indirect and ambiguous stance. For example, China's stance is more indirect and ambiguous when answering if China recognizes the independence of the self-proclaimed 'Donetsk People's Republic' and the 'Luhansk People's Republic'. It is difficult for Beijing to give a direct and clear yes or no. The risky implication of 'yes' is putting Taiwan in a position where it can be treated as an 'independent Republic'. Stating 'no' is risking deterioration of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership.

Second, China's stances and reactions are delimited by the features of the international structure. The current crisis may provoke a security-driven deglobalisation to some extent, yet the international structure is not featured as bipolar with the according polarisation and intra-bloc discipline of the Cold War, but evolving multipolar. China is highly embedded and entrenched within the depolarised and highly institutionalized system. Beijing deems a stable global economic order is essential for its further growth and prefers to stay out of the conflict.

Therefore, when asked if China supports international sanctions on Russia, China bluntly refused. Imposing sanctions on Russia conflicts with Chinese economic interests and its strategic partnerships with Russia. Beijing is against unilateral sanctions without the approval of the UN and insists on multilateralism.

Third, China's diplomatic stances and reactions are influenced by the interplay among major powers and global politics. The continuous deterioration of the China-US (EU) relationship, combining with Russia's pull, is driving Beijing close to Moscow. Despite official claims that the friendship between China and Russia has 'no limits', the two States are strategic partners but not allies that aim at confrontation or deterrence. Both sides maintain a high level of strategic autonomy. At the same time, the US and EU have a great stake in China's economic and foreign policy. China's leaders are keenly aware that any support to Russia over Ukraine would aggravate relations with the EU and the United States. Chinese strategists view Russia, the United States, and Europe as the most important determinants of the global balance of power.⁷ Beijing attempts to minimize collateral damage to Chinese interests from economic turmoil and potential secondary sanctions from the US and EU. It is unlikely that Beijing would sacrifice China's interests and undertake a challenging role by being deeply involved with Russia in Ukraine regardless of any possible outcome.

All the intertwined internal and external conditions are pushing and pulling China's diplomatic stances, tactical positioning, and strategic choices vis-à-vis the Crisis. Beijing has some flexibility to manoeuvre yet is also in a challenging spot to make its interests and principles be met both rhetorically and substantively.

Conclusion

In this paper, we mapped a picture of Beijing's stances and reactions and identified several sets of internal and external conditions to understand why and how China acts as such. As the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis is in

flux, China's policy evolution and strategic choices will further unfold in Ukraine.

In a connected, contested and complex world, it is unwise to assume *a priori* that China is fully backing Russia against the United States or Europe and beyond. China maintains a high level of strategic autonomy, neither Moscow nor Washington can frame alternatives and choices for Beijing. China views Russia, the United States, and Europe as the most important determinants of the global balance of power and tries to balance its core national interests during the process of multiple interplays.

Strategic partners like the EU may share different stances with China in the Ukraine crisis, yet it is important to continue to coordinate and cooperate in shared fields for both sides. As the EU wrote in its Indo-Pacific strategy that it should adapt and build its cooperation according to specific policy areas where partners can find common ground based on shared principles, values or mutual interest.⁸ Instead of confrontation, such cooperation is ever more essential and meaningful. Especially during crisis.

¹ "Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Ending Ukraine Crisis, as Russian Federation Wields Veto," *United Nations*, last modified February 25, 2022, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/sc14808.doc.htm> (accessed 25 March).

² See e.g. Edward Wrong and Julian E. Barnes, "Russia Asked China for Military and Economic Aid for Ukraine War, U.S. Officials Say," *New York Times*, March 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/13/us/politics/russia-china-ukraine.html> (accessed 23 March).

³ See e.g. Nike Ching, "US: China Risks Credibility by Backing Russia," *Voice of America*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/u-s-china-risks-credibility-by-backing-russia/6460255.html> (accessed 23 March).

⁴ See e.g. David Bandurski, "China and Russia are joining forces to spread disinformation," *Brookings*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/china-and-russia-are-joining-forces-to-spread-disinformation/> (accessed 23 March).

⁵ *Ministry of Foreign affairs of P. R. China*, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/>; https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjzb_673089/xghd_673097/; https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjzb_673089/zyjh_673099/.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign affairs of P. R. China: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/fyrbt_674889/

⁷ See Jude Blanchette and Bonny Lin, "China's Ukraine Crisis: What Xi Gains—and Loses—From Backing Putin", *Foreign Affairs*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-02-21/chinas-ukraine-crisis>.

⁸ "Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," *Council of the European Union*, April 16, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709.