

Understanding China's Position Towards the War in Ukraine: Lessons for a 'Superpower to-be'

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This policy outlook examines the positioning of China in the Russia-Ukraine War with a particular focus on its rise as a regional hegemonic power. China's position reflects a multidimensional learning process geared towards adjusting its strategy towards long-term objectives such as the integration of Taiwan into the body politic of the Chinese mainland. As part of this learning process, Beijing will have an opportunity to continue developing its economic and military power, challenge Western hegemony on ideological and informational grounds, and test the waters regarding a potential invasion of Taiwan. As complicated as its possible ramifications may seem now, the Russia-Ukraine War has the potential to increase China's prospects of becoming a regional hegemon par excellence if it successfully accomplishes this learning process in the sense of observing Russia's shortcomings and superiorities and making necessary adjustments and transformations of its own.

Introduction

The Russian attack launched against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has raised important questions about the future of global power politics and has already brought certain changes to the behavioural patterns of states. For instance, European countries have taken a firm stand against Moscow via economic and political sanctions, the decision of hitherto neutral Switzerland to take sides with its European neighbours, and Germany's plans to increase its military spending to more than 2% of its GDP. One of the major issues has to do with understanding the position of China vis-à-vis Russia with which it jointly declared a "friendship with no limits" on the opening day of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. It can be said that such a discourse of unlimited partnership will be one of the keys to understanding regional and global power dynamics as they continue to develop. This is also of particular importance if one also takes the rise of China as a candidate for regional hegemon in the Asia-Pacific into account. On the one hand, China aspires to maintain or even strengthen bilateral relations with Russia. On the other hand, as the U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan explicitly stated, providing Russia with economic lifeblood may bring unexpected costs to China. Apart from this paradoxical situation, China's stance on the war has so far been quite different from the clarity and firmness of political discourse and media framing in Western countries. While avoiding describing the conflict as a war or occupation in its state-run media channels, China has harshly criticized the economic sanctions imposed on Russia, maintaining a discourse of critique against a Western hegemony led by the United States. This paper will explore the positioning of China in the Russia-Ukraine War with a particular focus on its prospective rise as a regional hegemonic power. The argument I propose is that the position of China is a multi-dimensional learning process that can help it rethink or recalculate its long-term international objectives such as the integration of Taiwan into the body politic of the Chinese mainland and leading the Asia-Pacific. In this learning process, Beijing will have a strategic opportunity to develop its economic and military power, continue to challenge Western hegemony on ideological and informational grounds, and also test the waters regarding a possible military attack on Taiwan. However complicated its possible ramifications may seem now, the Russia-Ukraine War has the potential to increase China's prospects of becoming a regional hegemon par excellence if it successfully accomplishes this learning process in the sense of observing Russia's shortcomings and superiorities and making necessary adjustments and transformations of its own.

The Repercussions of War and Sanctions

It was only three weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine that China and Russia [declared](#) their "friendship with no limits". Both countries shared their firm stance against a world order whose contours and standards are determined by "certain countries" (i.e. the United States and its allies). This discourse, reflects an outlook that one can call post-Western¹. In other words, the main message conveyed by the joint statement of China and Russia is not directly against the international order itself, but rather those who govern it. Considering this was announced shortly before Russia launched its war, it is not difficult to understand Beijing's current political discourse vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine War and its reflections in state-supported Chinese media channels. Two main features have characterized the Chinese reaction to the war: (1) refraining from calling it a war or occupation and (2) criticizing the sanctions concerning their impacts on the global economy. For Beijing, maintaining peace is the key value they prioritize regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, though no Chinese authority has so far labelled the conflict as a war. In public statements and official video calls with President Biden, Chinese President Xi Jinping [underscored](#) that China prioritizes the basic principles of the UN Charter and the principle of state sovereignty. Regarding sanctions, President Xi Jinping [stressed](#) that economic sanctions are indiscriminate and generate irrevocable losses in financial markets and supply chains. Similarly, Guo Shuqing, chairman of the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission, [stated](#) that China will not be a part of sanctions against Russia because most of them lack a legal basis. On the media side of the issue, the war is generally being [framed](#) in a way that arouses antipathetic sentiments towards Western countries, especially towards the U.S. Recent coverage in Chinese media of the global reactions, which increased after several photos and videos regarding the massacre of Ukrainian civilians became viral on social media, show that Russia and China have extended the "friendship with no limits" strategy to the realm of the information war over Ukraine. In one [instance](#), the Bucha incident was framed in a way that cast doubt on whether Russia was responsible for these acts. Recently, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian [said](#) during a media briefing that incidents like Bucha should not be politicized before a proper investigation can be carried out. He also [criticized](#) economic sanctions imposed by Western countries against Russia on the grounds that while sanctions substantially benefit the American economy, European countries will suffer due to the energy shortage, capital outflows, and rising number of refugees.

¹ "The term *post-Western* has a wide range of usage in the field of social sciences. In the field of international relations, it mainly connotes a new global order whose norms and standards are no longer described and governed by Western countries, particularly the United States. Uneven economic growth of China coupled with the resurrection of Russia, and the rising importance of BRICS -Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa- have contributed to the emergence of such a new conception in world politics.



Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks with Chinese President Xi Jinping. (Kremlin Press Office - Anadolu Agency)

If China's insistent avoidance of labelling the conflict as a war or occupation, its official statements emphasizing its principled commitment to the UN values, its state-led media that critically questions the Western-dominated world order, and its criticisms that sanctions will disrupt the global commercial and financial order are considered together, it is possible to see that there is an underlying contradiction. China tries to play both cards simultaneously. On the one hand, it has positioned itself as taking a "middle-of-the-road" position by neither condemning Russia nor voicing support for its territorial ambitions. Considering China's reaction to Russia's expansionist territorial policies in the past, we can see the same approach was used. During the Russian annexation of Crimea in February 2014, for instance, China [acted](#) according to the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries and re-iterated its respect for the territorial integrity of Ukraine as a sovereign state. At the same time, however, it abstained from voting for the United Nations resolution, which envisaged declaring the results of the independence referendum held in Crimea as illegitimate. China wisely puts this particular foreign policy strategy in the context of what it officially calls the "[Five Principles of Coexistence](#)", which are mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence.

China has frequently used the rhetoric of multilateralism, cooperation, the spirit of the UN Charter, and human rights in its official responses to the questions about the war and the ongoing sanctions regime imposed against Russia. While criticizing the sanctions, for instance, it made official statements referring to the values of the liberal international order from which it benefited most. On the other hand, China maintains its critical attitude towards the West, es-

pecially the U.S. The interesting point is how China has instrumentalized liberal international values to challenge the Western-led status quo. It has become increasingly challenging to say that China has major problems and profound disagreements with liberal international values because it is one of the major beneficiaries of the liberal global order. Subsequent to its World Trade Organization membership in 2001, China experienced miraculous economic growth.¹ Although it seems like an oxymoron that China continues to be governed by a communist party, and at the same time it is a strong member of a global free trade institution, this paradox is crucial in terms of maintaining its one-party authoritarianism in domestic politics and its pursuit of hegemony in international politics. Similarly, it benefits from its permanent membership in the UN Security Council by holding veto power. Thus, despite the public criticisms, China seems at peace with the liberal international order. For China, the real question is about who leads the international system that is characterized by these values. Ultimately, China seeks to be the leader of its perceived sphere of influence under the principles of the liberal international order. In fact, this situation in itself indicates the Chinese-specific strategy that Ramo (2004) calls the "Beijing Consensus", developed in reaction to the Washington Consensus, which spread in the West in the post-Soviet 1990s world, during the heyday of neoliberalism. This new pattern of the Beijing Consensus under the guidance of state capitalism coupled with global free trade, which China has pursued in economic and social life, shows this dualism of China today. While China achieved enormous economic growth by following liberal economic policies, it does not aspire to pursue a project of liberalization in a political sense.³ Therefore, China is paradoxically instrumental in implementing the dictates of

² While China's GDP before WTO membership in 2001 was \$1.211 trillion, it skyrocketed to \$14.72 trillion in 2020. While the export volume was 253.092 billion dollars in 2000, it rose to 2.72 trillion dollars by 2020. See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.EXP.GNFS.CD?locations=CN>

liberal international order. From this perspective, we can better understand its strategic choice to refrain from condemning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. Beijing is well aware of the fact that the economic turmoil in which Russia is now entrapped is going to create new opportunities for its prospective interests. Its criticism of economic sanctions based on a set of international values and norms is instrumental if one considers that China does not want to lose the opportunity to be a lucrative “economic lifeblood” for Russia. In his [statement](#) on the subject, U.S. President Biden emphasized that a new sanctions regime would be applied against China if it provided military and economic assistance to Russia, which indicates that China would face difficulties in providing Russia with an economic buffer. Similarly, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman [said](#) that China should “take away the right lessons” from the ongoing sanctions imposed on Russia. Arguably, the real lessons that China is now taking away from the war are different from what the West envisages. When the war does eventually end, Russia will in any case try to make up for its losses with the support of China. The complex interdependency brought about by the liberal international order makes it impossible to completely exclude a country from international trade or finance. Especially if this country has rich energy resources. In other words, Russia cannot be treated like North Korea in the global economic architecture. China will inevitably have a special position as a source of recovery for Russia after the war is over. There are several ways through which China can provide the necessary support for Russia entrapped by sanctions. For instance, Russia, which was removed from the SWIFT payment system, can protect itself from total economic destruction by integrating into the alternative system developed by China, the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS). Although CIPS has several shortcomings compared to SWIFT, it can at least be an intermediary for trade. We can see a similar “lifeblood” situation in the context of bilateral trade. Although Europe is gradually trying to reduce its energy dependence on Russia, China [signed](#) a trade agreement stipulating new natural gas imports from Russia for the next 25 years. In addition, China has lifted restrictions on imports of Russian wheat, providing another lifeline to the Russian economy, which has been hit hard by the sanctions. As long as China takes similar steps in the post-war period, it will contribute great support to the recovery of the Russian economy.

For now, it is hard to predict the prospective American behaviour regarding the potential post-war role of China. In this case, one can consider two possible scenarios. Firstly, if the United States continues its insistence that China should not rescue Russia if it does not want to be exposed to similar economic sanctions, China will possibly react to such an imposition by hiding behind the instrumental

use of liberal institutional values of free trade and multilateralism. Secondly, if there is no further pressure by the West against China, it will probably do whatever it can for the maintenance of the “friendship with no limits”. Pursuing this strategy for China will turn into a rationale to use the asymmetrical power relationship it has with Russia in its favour, beyond simply being a benevolent support for the Russian economy. In the economic dimension of this [asymmetry](#), for example, Russia has a share of 2.9% of China’s total exports, while China’s share in Russia’s total exports is 15%. Considering that half of the total trade volume of the Russian economy consists of crude and refined oil, natural gas, and various minerals, it will be of great benefit for China to develop its trade with such a rich energy source under favourable conditions. The growing Chinese economy will always welcome a trading partner with as low a cost as possible to meet its energy needs. While China is an indispensable trade partner for Russia in a process in which Europe is seeking to reduce dependency on Russian energy, China will aim to gain from a desperate Russia as much as possible in its favour. In each scenario, China will prioritize its economic and political interests by instrumentalizing the principles of liberal institutional order. Its main rationale will be based on free trade, multilateralism, and complex interdependency. China will aspire to continue its commercial partnership with Russia in many fields, especially energy, by arguing that the war as a domestic affair of Russia should not overshadow economic relations. By doing so, it will aim to increase its gains from Russia’s economic dilemma.

How Will China Learn from the War in Ukraine?

In order to understand how China has positioned itself vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine war, it is necessary to understand its current position in the international distribution of power and how it wants to enhance it. Its tremendous economic growth coupled with a massive population makes China an indisputable candidate for becoming a hegemonic power in the Asia-Pacific region. In this context, China’s current discourse and practices demonstrate a particular learning process combined with a “wait and see” strategy. China’s learning process mainly consists of three areas: (1) military improvement, (2) economic development, and finally (3) testing the waters of international power politics. These three can provide China with a genuine framework for its prospective aims regarding Taiwan and preparedness for becoming regional hegemonic power that needs to be both economically and militarily strong in the future. The former has been one of the major issues on Beijing’s

³ The Beijing Consensus reflects the Chinese way of understanding development in terms of economy, society, and culture. It is a reaction against the growing uniformity around the Washington Consensus. For further discussion, see Bell, D. (2018). *The China model: political meritocracy and the limits of democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press and Interview with Joshua Cooper Ramo (August 10, 2016) on <https://thediomat.com/2016/08/interview-joshua-cooper-ramo/>

national agenda for a long time. The second, however, depends substantially on the resolution of the Taiwan issue and can further develop China's long-term vision of becoming a superpower in the Asia-Pacific. Therefore, the Russia-Ukraine war is not reducible to the short-term interest calculations for China but is directly linked to a long-term understanding of global power politics.

1. Military Improvement

One of the most important lessons China is [learning](#) from the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War has to do with military improvement, both organizationally and technically. Aiming to increase its defence spending by 7.1% this year, China will [spend](#) \$229.47 billion. Continuing to increase its military power in parallel with its increasing economic power, China will seek to learn from Russia's failures in the field by improving its military capabilities. The aim to modernize all military branches is one of the official themes consistently prioritized by the Communist Party of China. It consists of a comprehensive set of reforms whose results are expected to bring mechanization, informatization, and intelligence to all branches in the long run. For China, improving the military is about creating strategies focused on catching up with the global trends in the sense of improving its military structure, rather than taking any country as a model. In other words, this means making reforms by observing the outside world and developing one's own model. The 2015 Military Reforms had already [initiated](#) a wide spectrum of organizational and operational changes in the armed forces, thereby restructuring the PLA. In this context, the number of military regions was reduced to five theatre commands from seven. Moreover, the transition from a ground-based operation strategy to a joint operation strategy covering land, air, sea, and rocket forces was introduced. The lack of coordination between land, air, and naval forces has been one of the discernible shortcomings of Russia in its invasion of Ukraine. If understood correctly, this particular lesson promises to yield vital advantages for China's prospective aspirations regarding Taiwan. It [seems](#) that China has begun to prioritize a military transformation and adaptation process in its learning process. New military strategies for joint operations and cross-training have begun to be implemented by the PLA. In this way, military branches that have historically different internal structures will gain the experience of acting together through mutual communication and coordination, and it will be ensured that the loss of life and equipment will be minimized in case of a military operation.

One of the [issues](#) that Russia has had difficulty with was related to its recruitment and mobilization regulations. With [Martial Law](#) declared, the regulations preventing those who did not receive at least four months of training from participating in the war were suspended. Thus, the way for [untrained](#) personnel to join the war in Ukraine was opened. China, which is in a similar position as Russia in terms of conscription, still lacks a professional military recruitment

strategy. With the approval of Xi Jinping, China has started to make important [regulations](#) in order for the PLA to be filled with more highly trained personnel, as well as to improve the conscription process in line with the talents of soldiers within different branches. Another difficulty of Russia in Ukraine seems to be related to the apparently sudden decision to attack. Details of the invasion were kept [secret](#) for a long time only between Putin and senior civilian and military personnel in his inner circle. The psychological effects of the ongoing war on the soldiers and the public were not elaborately discussed. The personalistic regime of Russia centred mainly on Putin severely precluded any deliberation and discussion of the sudden decision to attack. It is highly probable that top military commanders miscalculated the psychological state of the soldiers if the war lasts more than they envisaged. The unwillingness of many Russian soldiers, some of whom seem to have not even known why they were fighting in Ukraine, ultimately leads to poor performance. War conditions are very conducive to psychological breakdown and reluctance. In an [interview](#), Latvian National Armed Forces chief psychologist Vilnis Čerņavskis said that it seems clear that Russian soldiers, whose average age is 25, were not prepared well for the reasons, conditions, and timing of the war. As the war becomes protracted, Russian soldiers will suffer severely from a lack of motivation and psychological problems because of the ongoing Ukrainian resistance. In this regard, China is already well prepared. With the Chinese education system and media under the close supervision of the Communist Party, the sensitivity of national values and especially the Taiwan issue are systematically [instilled](#) in citizens from childhood. In addition, China's use of its media channels more effectively and instilling the idea that Taiwan will not be supported by the US in a possible invasion may also be a reinforced dimension of psychological warfare.

The fact that the Russian army in Ukraine, by many accounts, has underperformed brought to the surface long-standing allegations of corruption among the ranks. Disruptions in the supply of military equipment, food, and fuel have been widely associated with reported [corruption](#) in the defence industry and military. In order to avoid such problems, China's primary lesson should be based on increasing transparency in defence spending and investigating all corruption allegations. It has been [claimed](#) that there is endemic [corruption](#) and a serious bribery problem in many branches of the PLA. It is [known](#) that Xi Jinping wanted to gain the loyalty of the military to the party by promoting the generals to higher positions such as the Central Theatre Command as part of anti-corruption measures. One of the most sensational events in this process was the unexpected dismissal and imprisonment of Hu Wenming, the head of the China State Shipbuilding Corporation, on [allegations](#) of corruption. Another [allegation](#) in the naval forces of China was that Sun Bo, one of the key executives of the same corporation, shared the technical details of China's aircraft carrier named Liaoning with the

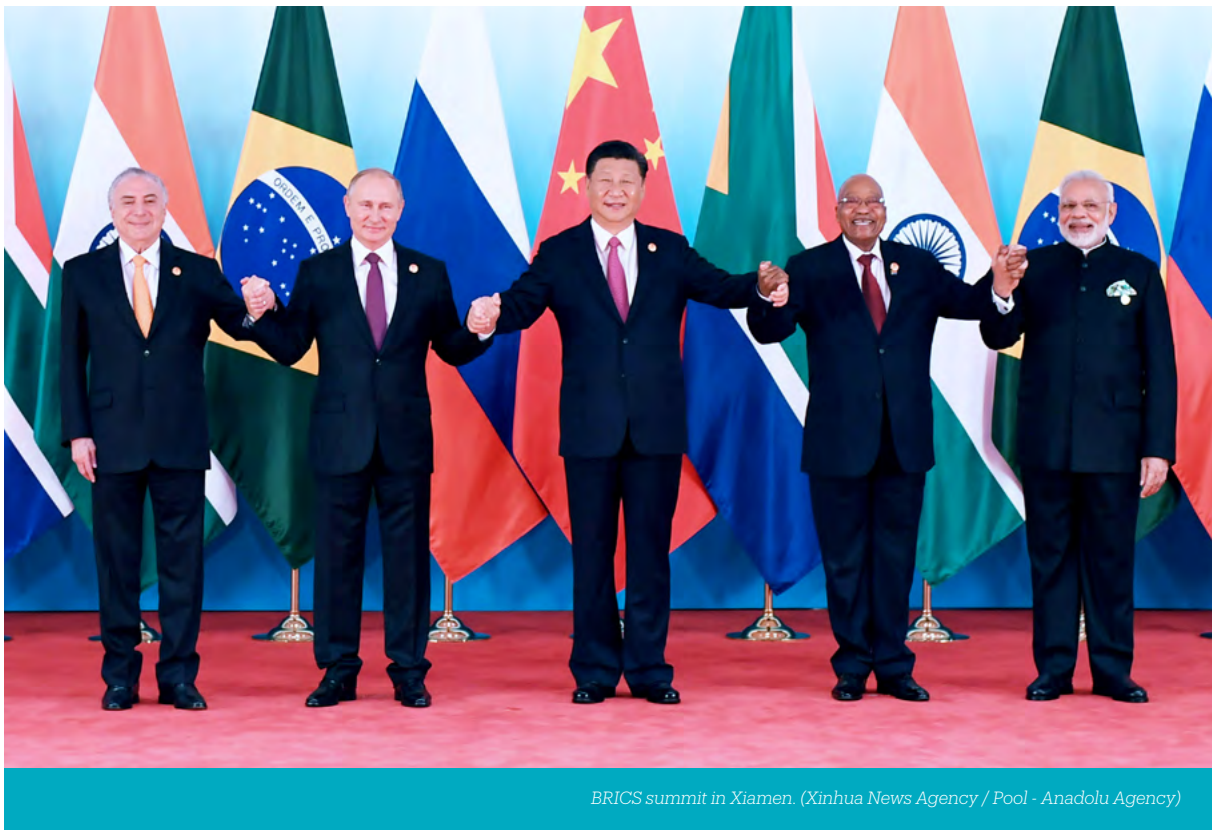
CIA. We have seen that the Chinese Communist Party has taken strict measures recently to find solutions to such established problems. The CCP administration [investigated](#) 302,000 low and high-ranking military personnel during the first half of 2018. Under the anti-corruption project, Fang Fenghui, former chief of the joint staff in the PLA, was sentenced to life imprisonment for a bribery scandal. By doing so, it encourages top generals to adhere to party loyalty and transparency through promotion, as well as focuses on the individual power networks within the military that are at risk of corruption by closely investigating the frequency of individual contacts and meetings between high officers.⁴

2. Economic Development

China, whose economic growth has been remarkable for the last 20 years, has underlined from the very beginning that it will not be a part of the economic sanctions regime imposed on Russia by the West. Chinese authorities have stated that the sanctions were unfair, associating them with the violation of basic principles of the liberal institutional order such as multilateralism, free trade, and international law. China, which is of vital importance to the devastated Russian economy, seeks economic gains by trying to maintain its neutral position. Rather than reducing China's position to a state of indecision or ambiguity between the West and Russia, focusing on the economic lessons, it can

draw from the ongoing war may yield more beneficial conclusions. We can understand the economic development dimension of the issue by putting it in the context of China's future regional hegemonic power goals coupled with its designs for Taiwan. China is trying to learn the lesson of economic development in order not to fall into the same situation that Russia is suffering today regarding a possible future invasion of Taiwan. First, it should be noted that Russia's leverage in the global economy is not comparable to China's. In the context of global value chains, China is the [leader](#), producing 18.33% of global GDP, while Russia has a share of 3.11%. Chinese exports make up 10.78% of the global total, making it the main exporter in the world. Russia's share in terms of global exports was 2.07% of the total. The reaction of the world's second-largest economy to economic sanctions cannot be considered independent of its position in global trade. The current liberal institutional order laid the foundations of economic interdependence through which no individual nation can assume an isolated position. Therefore, in the face of a sanction regime being imposed on China, not only China itself but also the whole international community would have to calculate the costs and risks of such an exclusion.

There are plenty of lessons China is learning from the ongoing war regarding alternative harm scenarios. China is increasing its preparedness regarding a potential sanctions regime that could hit its production facilities which



BRICS summit in Xiamen. (Xinhua News Agency / Pool - Anadolu Agency)

⁴ The report prepared by the U.S Department of Defence includes further information about the CCP's efforts to eliminate corruption in the military. Available at <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF?source=GovDelivery>

constitute 50% of its economy. In this context, China's "Made in China 2025" is one of the key initiatives that envisages a comprehensive transition from a low-tech production to tech-intensive industries in which semiconductors, chips, and high-tech devices are produced and sold in the global market. By doing so, China wants to break the technological dependency, which weakens its economic power. Not surprisingly, the global repercussions of this project have raised several questions and criticisms in the West. Western countries, particularly the U.S. have growing suspicions about the scope and operationalization of the initiative because it is often said that China [violates](#) intellectual property rights and data privacy, and is an acquirer of American firms. President Trump [issued](#) an executive order about the ban on some social apps such as TikTok and WeChat from U.S. app stores. It was claimed that these apps steal and collect personal data. Also, the Biden administration blacklisted eight Chinese companies on [allegations](#) of assisting the Chinese military to steal secret information from the U.S. military. Biden also signed another law that Chinese tech companies such as Huawei and ZTE are not [allowed](#) to do business in the U.S. market due to national security concerns. Another key initiative by China is the "Standards 2035" project that reflects the Chinese [ambitions](#) to break Western hegemony in terms of setting the global standards for new technologies, the communication sector, and artificial intelligence. Both initiatives complement each other in that the former lays the production-based foundations of China's economic development, while the latter complements it in terms of governing the technological standards and norms that frame it. They demonstrate the extent to which China sustains its long-lasting rationale that it is insistent on [challenging](#) Western hegemony not only in political terms but also in the field of economic and technological development. For Western countries who see Chinese foreign investment as a "trojan horse", the sustainability of such initiatives within the existing borders of the trade regime remains unclear. On the other hand, joint venture requirements dictated by the Chinese administration seem to be another major question mark regarding the sustainability of foreign direct investment. Regardless of the prospective yields that these projects are expected to bring, the essential point is that China does not want to be entrapped in terms of economic dependence in the future. This constitutes one of the main lessons it is taking from the reactions to Russia's invasion. After the US-China trade wars, Xi Jinping's mention of the ["Dual Circulation Model"](#) strategy means a China that aims to reduce its economic dependency on imports as much as possible and to increase reliance on domestic markets. In this context, China does not want to be a late-comer to this strategy, which Russia had also aimed but [failed](#) to achieve.

Regarding the ongoing discussions on the effectiveness of sanctions, one of the most important issues is how China can serve as a lifeline for Russia. Since Russia has been all

but cut off from most of its foreign exchange reserves held outside the country, it has been left with reserves in Yuan and gold. As a result, China has an advantageous position in promoting its interests. Russia's prospective integration into the Chinese financial networks through its existing FX in the form of Chinese yuan can provide China with increased economic gains. It is also in doubt that China will completely save Russia, although it could potentially afford such a rescue operation for the sake of "friendship with no limits". However, the real question that one should ask is not about the capabilities of China. Rather, we should question how China can transform Russian dependency into a boost for its own interests, as well as how it relates to the Chinese aim to become a regional power. An economically isolated Russia promises significant geopolitical and economic advantages if China correctly understands the way through which it can benefit from the desperate situation of Russia. Unlike the ex-ante "friendship with no limits" discourse, the power asymmetry between the two countries will be much greater in the post-war configuration. Russia is and will inevitably be the weaker partner in the relationship and as Russia's dependency increases, it will have fewer and fewer cards to play to gain leverage in the relationship. Thus, for example, China, which will have easier and cheaper [access](#) to oil and natural gas in the post-war context as it is already doing, will take advantage of these conditions by making payments in yuan or benefiting from lower prices as in the [case](#) of China's imports of Iranian oil. However, China's main trade bodies such as Sinopec, CNOOC, PetroChina, and Sinochem have [refrained](#) from new oil purchases in addition to the existing agreements in the midst of the current sanction regime against Russia. By doing, China is seeking to make sure that it is not labelled as a power that intentionally circumvents economic sanctions in the eyes of the West.

3. Testing the Waters of International Power Politics

It is often difficult to predict how the actors in international power politics will react in times of crisis. Recently, the exception to this in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War was Biden's clear [statement](#) that the US would not send troops to Ukraine. Similarly, NATO has shown the same [reluctance](#) to send troops and declare a no-fly zone. As the fog of war reigns in international politics, one of the things China can learn is to question the limits of the US policy strategic ambiguity policy on Taiwan. For the US, maintaining strategic ambiguity is much more effective in terms of deterrence. For China, which is willing to gradually transform its growing and transforming economic power into military power, the most cost-effective way to test the limits of ambiguity is primarily via political discourse. It is worth emphasizing two important issues here. First, the US response to Taiwan may not be on the same level as its response to Ukraine was. In other words, if we consider China as the number one potential threat to the US, we can say that the tolerance



70th session of the United Nations General Assembly.
(UN Photo/Loey Felipe/Pool - Anadolu Agency)

level of the US in a Chinese invasion of Taiwan will be much lower. The legal ground that the US maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan under the [1979 Taiwan Relations Act](#) and that it will continue independently of the presidents in power may lead the US to react more proactively. Although U.S. military intervention is not guaranteed under the Act, it is one of the possibilities. However, given that the Act reflects a strategic calculation based on Chinese power forty years ago, the possibility remains that the U.S. may opt out of direct military options altogether. Secondly, China does not want to equate the perceptions of Taiwan and Ukraine in the eyes of the international community. Taiwan has embedded importance in China so that there are no genuine similarities with the Russian invasion of Ukraine whose *casus belli* was “denazification” and “demilitarization”.

In this part of learning, the U.S. seems to be more active in terms of testing the Chinese behaviour through inciting statements that imply a sort of “strategic clarity” instead of perpetuating the long-held strategic ambiguity. For instance, when Biden was [asked](#) last year whether the United States would defend Taiwan in the face of a possible Chinese attack, he gave an affirmative answer. The White House followed up this comment by making a public statement that there is no change in the American policy of strategic ambiguity regarding Taiwan. Biden’s words were mostly interpreted as being “misspoken”. The underlying rationale for such contradictions, however, can be seen as being about testing the reaction of the other side without departing from official policy. The Chinese [response](#) to Biden’s preciseness was that such statements send the wrong signals to the partisans of Taiwan’s independence and are considered “very dangerous”. From one perspective, Biden’s statement can be seen as a deliberate strategy of testing the Chinese reaction. For its part, considering the recent escalations towards Taiwanese airspace China can be seen as testing the flexibility of the American foreign policy and trying to understand its limits. It persistently avoids informing the international community about its new national outlook regarding the Taiwan issue and remains the issue a real “secret”. Its primary discourse pattern is shaped only by giving response to the [statements](#) of

other countries. Moreover, testing the dynamics of international power politics is not limited to measuring only U.S. behaviour. It can also be useful for China in understanding the reaction of other important powers such as India, South Korea, and Japan in the Asia-Pacific. Although the discourse of Chinese officials has been opposed to any similarities being made between Russia’s territorial ambitions for Ukraine and China’s position towards Taiwan, Chinese-led media have published some [opinions](#) that, at times, have drawn on these comparisons. While these two issues are regarded as substantially different at the official level, the idea being played on by Chinese media is that Taiwan will ultimately be abandoned by the U.S. just like Ukraine. Thus, China can be seen as instrumentalising this similarity in terms of discouraging the Taiwanese Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) which is known for its strict commitment to independence.

Conclusion

Although there are quite different developmental trajectories for each case in international power politics, nations can sometimes learn from the successes or shortcomings of others. Accordingly, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War represents an important “case in point” for Russia’s strategic partner. For China, it is possible to draw lessons from Russia’s experiences during the war in the context of military improvement, economic development, and testing the waters of international power politics. China is paradoxically a product of the liberal institutional order built by the West under the leadership of the U.S., as [Mearsheimer](#) (2014) argues. Instead of destroying the existing order that it immensely benefits from, China is trying to live in harmony with the values of this order, or at least instrumentalize them and try to come to the point where it will have the potential to rule this order. China continues to carefully calculate its strategic interests in line with its regional hegemonic objectives. It is watching and learning the way through which Western countries react against a territorial invasion on their borders. It continues to guard its neutral stance and is seeking to benefit from Russia’s dependency on it as an economic lifeline. In many areas, from sanctions to military organization, China has learned and will continue learning from Russia as if it were in an experimental laboratory of international power politics. Regardless of China’s Taiwan strategy in the foreseeable future, one can say that as the priorities of nations change from one conjuncture to another, it is inevitable that new strategies emerge. One way to test the new boundaries of new strategies is “testing the outside” through calculated and deliberate discourses. This is a dynamic and interactive learning process for those who do not want to be entrapped by the same mistake that another country once made.