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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate mandala pattern in a lighter shade of green is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the text area.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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SPECIAL ARTICLE

WHEN HISTORY RHYMES: CHINA'S RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Enrico Fardella

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In a recent publication, the renowned expert on Sino-Russian relations, Inge Bekkevold, wrote that in the last century «China has seen Russia as imperialist, a comrade in arms, an enemy and a partner, and is now debating whether it should be an ally». This paper attempts to connect these views with the most recent evolution of Sino-Russian relations at the time of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. It first describes Russia's role as China's territorial threat and as a political antagonist from the end of the Qing dynasty to the fall of the Soviet Union. It then looks at the rise of Russia as China's main anti-hegemonic partner after the Cold War, with a special focus on the evolution of the Sino-Russian «unlimited partnership» during Xi Jinping's second mandate and its sudden revision after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The analysis will then address the evolution of China's most recent «pro-Russian neutrality» as Beijing's attempt to detach itself from Moscow's military adventurism while maintaining its strategic anti-hegemonic alignment with Moscow. In the conclusion, the paper will try to assess the rationale of China's revision of its «unlimited partnership» on the basis of Beijing's historical experience with Russia and will then point out China's interests and divergences with Moscow in order to provide a useful conceptual toolkit to foresee the future evolution of Sino-Russian relations.

KEYWORDS – China; Russia; foreign relations; unlimited partnership.

1. Introduction¹

In a recent publication, the renowned expert on Sino-Russian relations, Inge Bekkevold, wrote that in the last century «China has seen Russia as imperialist, a comrade in arms, an enemy and a partner, and is now debating whether it should be an ally». This paper attempts to connect these views with the most recent evolution of Sino-Russian relations at the time

1. The author is deeply grateful to Sergey Radchenko, Mohammed Al Sudairi and the anonymous peer-reviewers for their valuable comments to this paper.

of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. It first describes Russia's role as China's territorial threat and as a political antagonist from the end of the Qing dynasty to the fall of the Soviet Union. It then looks at the rise of Russia as China's main anti-hegemonic partner after the Cold War, with a special focus on the evolution of the Sino-Russian «unlimited partnership» during Xi Jinping's second mandate and its sudden revision after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The analysis will then address the evolution of China's most recent «pro-Russian neutrality» as Beijing's attempt to detach itself from Moscow's military adventurism while maintaining its strategic anti-hegemonic alignment with Moscow. In the conclusion, the paper will try to assess the rationale of China's revision of its «unlimited partnership» on the basis of Beijing's historical experience with Russia and will then point out China's interests and divergences with Moscow in order to provide a useful conceptual toolkit to foresee the future evolution of Sino-Russian relations.

2. A defining relationship: historical sediments of Sino-Russian relations

According to some renowned Chinese scholars, in the last two centuries, Russia has profoundly shaped the evolution of Chinese domestic and foreign policy. The leading Chinese expert on Russia, Prof. Feng Yujun, Professor at the History Department of Peking University, recently published an influential essay that looks at the matrix of Sino-Russian relations through a historical perspective. In history, he writes, all the three alliances between China and Russia ended with China paying a heavy price.

The first time was in 1896, after the First Sino-Japanese War, when China and Russia signed the Li-Lobanov Treaty (中俄密約) named after its negotiators Li Hongzhang, a leading Chinese diplomat and statesman, and Alexei Lobanov-Rostovsky, the Russian Foreign Minister. The treaty was primarily a defensive military alliance. Russia agreed to assist China in the event of a Japanese attack, a concern for China following its defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). The treaty granted Russia the right to build the Chinese Eastern Railway, which was a crucial part of the Trans-Siberian Railway. This railway was to pass through Manchuria, significantly enhancing Russia's influence and presence in the region.

The second alliance, known as the Sino-Soviet Treaty (中苏友好同盟条约), was signed between the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek and Stalin after the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1945. The treaty stipulated Sino-Soviet cooperation against Japanese forces in Manchuria and the facilitation of Soviet aid to the Chinese Nationalist government. As a result, China was forced to recognise the 1945 Mongolian independence referendum in Outer Mongolia that was orchestrated by the Soviet Union, leading to the «loss» of nearly 1.6 million square kilometres of territory

immediately after China had just spent eight years fighting against the Japanese invaders.² The treaty granted the Soviet Union concessions in Port Arthur (旅顺口) and Dalian (大连) and control over the Chinese Eastern Railway and the South Manchuria Railway, which were key strategic and economic assets.

The third alliance was after 1949, when Mao chose to «lean to one side» (一边倒) and signed a formal treaty with Stalin in Moscow right after the foundation of the People's Republic of China. Prof. Feng claims that this alliance brought two critical impacts on China; it favoured Beijing's isolation from the international community and pushed China into the Korean War. The latter decision led to the loss of countless Chinese lives and also severely strained China-US relations, making it difficult for China to prosper for the next several decades [Feng 2023, 7 January].

The cost of «leaning to one side» and the Korean War was certainly huge and, eventually, influenced a profound process of revision of Chinese domestic and foreign policies aimed at shedding Soviet influence and re-launching Mao's original vision of the Chinese revolution.³ A vision that surpassed the primacy of the proletarian revolution preached by the USSR and reposed Mao's identification of anti-imperialist liberation as the «main contradiction» of the international system [Niu 2012: 66].

In the year before the «leaning to one side», in fact, Mao had reinterpreted the Chinese revolution outside the binary Cold War context. In 1946, Mao argued that the primary global conflict was not the rivalry between the US and USSR, as many of his comrades argued. Instead, he saw it as stemming from the American reactionaries' efforts to broaden their influence over an extensive «intermediate zone» (中间地带) that included former European colonial powers and semi-colonial and colonial regions in the Southern Hemisphere, the Middle East, and China. According to the Chinese leader, this area was the first target that the reactionaries were meant to subjugate in order to encircle and weaken the Soviet Union, the major obstacle in their path to global dominance. Mao therefore identified the central conflict – i.e. the «main contradiction» – as between the American reactionaries' hegemonic ambitions and the independence movements within the «intermediate zones». In Mao's view, revolutionary China had a

2. China however had not controlled this territory since 1921 so it was more a «perceived» loss than a factual one.

3. According to Major General Xu Yan (徐焰), a professor at the Chinese People's Liberation Army's National Defense University, China paid a heavy price for its decision to enter the conflict. According to his estimates, the total number of Chinese casualties in the war amounts to 180,000, the war costs were as much as 6.2 billion yuan and China's military debt to the Soviet Union reached 3 billion yuan [*Global Times*, 2010, 27 October]. Furthermore, US President Harry Truman's decision to come to rescue of Syngman Rhee's South Korean regime and to dispatch the Seventh Fleet to «neutralize» the Taiwan Strait added Taiwan to the US security perimeter, forcing Mao to indefinitely postpone the invasion of the island.

crucial, transformative role in this context, as the first defender of Socialism and leader of the anti-hegemonic front in what Mao assessed as the «third pole», namely «the intermediate zones» [Mao 1946: 1184-1185; Talk with A. L. Strong 1946; Lu 1946, 4 January].

When the Cominform in 1947 emphasized the division of the world into two opposing camps – the imperialist and anti-democratic camp led by the United States, and the anti-imperialist and democratic camp led by the Soviet Union – Mao adjusted his strategy to elevate China's position within the post-Yalta international framework. Initially, Mao deemphasized his «intermediate zones» theory, which highlighted the unique nature of the Chinese revolution, and aligned more closely with the Soviet Union's «two camps» concept [Tang 2008: 53].

After his trip to Moscow, however, Mao complained about Stalin's behaviour. As clearly explained by historian Odd Arne Westad, Mao was frustrated by Stalin as the latter aimed at securing a treaty that was conducive to Soviet security, rather than an alliance between two Communist-led states [Westad 2005: 65]. Mao's frustration with the Soviet Union deepened during the Korean War: Stalin's decision to avoid a direct confrontation with the US clashed with Mao's expectation for stronger Soviet support during the conflict. Moreover, the outbreak of the Korean War, and the consequential inclusion of Taiwan into the US security perimeter, cost Mao the indefinite postponement of his original intention to complete national unification by invading Taiwan. As clearly shown by renowned Chinese historian Shen Zihua, these events sowed the seeds for the future Sino-Soviet split and activated a long process of correction of Chinese foreign policy aimed at shedding Soviet influence [Shen 2020: 130].

From the mid-1950s to the end of the Cold War, China's domestic and foreign policies were deeply influenced by the growing antagonism with Moscow. Mao eventually perceived Soviet ideological influence as an obstacle for the independent realization of China's revolution and started challenging the Soviet leadership of the international communist movement. This shift progressively detached China from the «two camps» structure and revitalised Mao's original anti-hegemonic and anti-imperialist policy, derived from the Chinese revolution [Radchenko 2024].

The radicalization of China's policies in the 1960s was intended to expel Soviet malevolent influence (i.e. «revisionism») – a process that resulted in the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution – and transform China into the leader of the anti-imperialist struggle in the «intermediate zones».

In 1969, the intensification of anti-Soviet sentiments within China and the repeated military confrontations at the border between the two socialist giants turned Soviet «social-imperialism» – as it was labelled by Mao – into Beijing's main foreign threat. This, in turn, prompted China into a rapprochement with the United States – epitomized by Mao's handshake with Nixon in 1972 – that marked a profound alteration in the bipolar bal-

ance of forces and provided an enormous plus to the American global strategy against Moscow.

At the end of the 1970s, Deng Xiaoping's added a domestic element – the economic reform – to Mao's diplomatic «opening» to the West. Deng's economic reforms combined China's abundant workforce with Western capital and know-how, and Western economies with much-coveted access to the enormous Chinese market. China's relationship with the West was thereby «internalized» as a crucial factor to relaunch China's economy and lead it to regain its central position in Asia. This set the ground for China's «de-facto» alliance with the US and their allies against Moscow and, at the same time, favoured a progressive liberalisation of Chinese political, economic and social dynamics on the domestic front [Fardella, 2009].

As had already happened with China's alliance with the Soviet Union in the 1950s, the Chinese leadership began to perceive the influence of US dominant role in the relationship as a challenge for the independent course of Chinese politics. In the 1980s, China's entente and engagement with the West started to be perceived as a menace by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and reinforced Beijing's strategy towards a more independent stance in international affairs.

In a report delivered at the 12th National Congress of the CCP in 1982, Deng Xiaoping formally announced China's independent foreign policy grounded on the three principles – not seeking hegemony, not aligning with any major power, not engaging in military expansion – better known as the «Three No's» policy. These principles were meant to guide China's foreign relations and position the country as an independent actor, avoiding the ideological rivalries of the Cold War superpowers. This represented a further correction of China's foreign policy – which had been heavily influenced by its alliances with the Soviet Union and later the United States during the Cold War – and a return to Mao's original attempt to carve an autonomous and influential role for China as a counterweight to global powers and a champion of the developing world (i.e. «the intermediate zones»). Deng's «Three No's» policy provided a framework for China to gradually normalize and improve its relations with the USSR, as the two countries moved away from the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s.

The rise of Mikhail Gorbachev as the new leader of the Soviet Union and its proactive openings towards a normalization of the relations with Beijing, contributed to Beijing's attempt to enhance its independent stance in international affairs and balance its reliance over Western support with a reduction of the tensions with Moscow. In a speech delivered on the 28th of July 1986 in Vladivostok on Soviet's policy in the Asia-Pacific the Soviet leader expressed its intention to normalize relations with China and overcome past tensions by reducing the troops deployed along the border and transform the common border in a «line of peace and friendship». [*The New York Times*, 1986, 29 July]

This led to a series of high-level meetings to normalize ties and resolve longstanding border issues. In May 1989, Gorbachev visited Beijing, marking the first Sino-Soviet summit in 30 years.

This visit occurred amidst the Tiananmen Square protests, as student-led demonstrations were taking place in the Chinese capital, an event that, to the eyes of the Chinese leadership, proved the destabilizing effect that Western influence could pose to Party leadership.

Despite the domestic unrest, Gorbachev and Deng were able to reach an important agreement during the summit aimed at reducing military tensions, setting up a joint mechanism for troops reductions along the border and normalize diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries.

By the end of the year, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe were perceived by the Chinese leadership as Western attempts to implement a «peaceful» evolution that would lead to the overthrow of all socialist regimes [USSR Collapse 2023].

The collapse of the Soviet Union, which followed in 1991, therefore generated two fundamental effects over Chinese domestic and foreign policies.

Internally, the dynamics that led to the crisis of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) have been carefully analyzed by the CCP and have inspired Chinese domestic policies to this day. In a speech delivered in December 2012, shortly after he became the General Secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping described the collapse of the Soviet Union as a «tragedy» and a cautionary tale for the Party. Xi's description of the Soviet Union's fall focused on the loss of ideological conviction and political corruption as key factors leading to its disintegration. The message was clear; the Communist Party of China must learn from the Soviet Union's mistakes and remain vigilant against internal and external threats to its governance and ideological purity [Xi 2023; Gao 2013; Historical Lessons USSR 2021].

Externally, the fall of the Soviet Union coupled with the rise of a new US hegemonic push at the beginning of the 1990s - vividly represented by American military interventions in the Middle East and in the Balkans - to reinforce the emphasis of China's foreign policy on achieving a more independent and antihegemonic horizon. As brilliantly described by Rushi Doshi, Biden's National Security Council director for China, since the 1990s China smoothly implemented a series of tactics aimed at blunting US power projection at regional and global level [Doshi 2021]. Within this framework, Beijing rediscovered Russia as a useful partner for the creation of a less-hegemonic international system whose power distribution could be less «unipolar» – i.e. centred around the values and interests of Washington – and thus more distributed among various «poles» of the system itself.

3. *The rise of the «unlimited» partnership: Sino-Russian relations and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine*

In 2001, shortly after Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency of Russia, Moscow and Beijing ratified the «Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation», signifying a pivotal moment in their bilateral ties. This agreement highlighted mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, a pledge towards non-aggression – which was crucial given the history of border disputes and conflicts between the two nations – and articulated a mutual aspiration for a multipolar world, starkly critical of the existing international unipolar system, dominated by the United States. It also heralded the start of economic collaboration, particularly in energy, propelling Russia to become a major oil and natural gas provider to China.

The 2007-8 financial crisis in the United States and China's resilient economic momentum were perceived by Beijing as signalling the wane of American unipolarity and the opening of a strategic window that would establish China as a pivotal international player. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, what was characterized as a new era in international relations saw a fortified partnership with Moscow. In Xi's intentions, this fortified relationship was aimed at reinforcing an anti-hegemonic stance, challenging American influence and paving the way for a new global governance model, centred around the CCP's values and interests. In March 2013, marking his first state visit as president, Xi Jinping travelled to Moscow, where he unveiled his vision for a «community with a shared future for mankind», laying the groundwork for China's ambition to reshape global governance [*China Daily* 2023, 23 March].

The year 2018 was another landmark in Sino-Russian relations. March witnessed the re-election of Vladimir Putin as Russia's President and the re-election of Xi Jinping as President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) during the 13th National People's Congress (NPC). The same Congress also saw the removal of the presidential term limit, granting Xi an indefinite tenure. Concurrently, Le Yucheng, an expert on Russian affairs within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was appointed deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, signalling Beijing's intention to emphasize Sino-Russian relations.

In June 2018, Xi Jinping conferred upon Putin the first «Friendship Medal of the People's Republic of China», while underscoring a deep personal bond with the Russian leader by referring to him as his «closest friend» (最好的知心朋友) [*Xinhua* 2018, 8 June].

These developments significantly enhanced the potential for bilateral relations, especially in anticipation of their 70th anniversary in 2019. In a relevant policy article published in the CCP's theoretical journal, Vice-Foreign Minister Le outlined the evolution of bilateral ties from 1949 to 1989, highlighting the adherence to principles of nonalignment, non-confron-

tation, and not targeting third parties. Le remarked that these principles paved the way for a positive trajectory in relations, leading to their current stable and healthy state. He emphasised that these foundational principles were not mere outcomes but crucial starting points for future progress in bilateral relations, implying their further elevation «beyond» the existing foundational principles [Le 2019a].

In November 2019, following discussions with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Le declared that there were «no restriction on the growth of Sino-Russian ties» showing the intention to effectively removing barriers to their growth, although without formally altering its fundamental non-alignment principle [Le 2019b; Le 2019, 26 November].

This wording set the tone of Chinese official discourse that began emphasising the absence of limitation on Sino-Russian cooperation. The same position was reiterated by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov in February 2021 and by Le Yucheng's statement in December 2021 [MOFAPRC 2021; *Xinhua* 2021, 4 February].

This led to the often-quoted formula adopted in the official statement that followed Putin's official visit to China on 4 February 2022 for the inaugural ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games. In the document, the two sides reaffirmed in fact «that the new interstate relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era. Friendship between the two states has no limits [and] there are no forbidden areas of cooperation» [Government of Russia 2022]. As anticipated by Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng in 2019 and restated in his interviews following the leaders' meetings, these words officially indicated that the bilateral relations had entered a new qualitatively higher level from that of the era of «nonalignment, non-confrontation, and not targeting third parties» [MOFAPRC 2022a].

When, on 24 February 2022, Putin's troops started the invasion of Ukraine (the «Special Military Operation», SMO, in the official formula used by Moscow's propaganda) the international community began guessing whether China was previously informed by the Russians. Some Western media even claimed that Xi Jinping had asked Putin to postpone the attack until after the Olympic Games [*The New York Times* 2022, 2 March]. Although the tension between Russia and Ukraine was mounting in the days of Xi and Putin meeting, there is no clear indication that China was informed about the incoming Russian military operations. According to Alexander Gabuev, Carnegie expert on Sino-Russian relations, China was not informed about the Russian imminent attack as Sino-Russian relations were built on an informal anti-Western coalition, but were lacking the trust and mutual interest to be considered an alliance. This intrinsic distrust between the two sides, affirmed Gabuev, had historically prevented the two nations from discussing sensitive issues as in the case of the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 [Radchenko & Gabuev 2022]. This assessment may be further confirmed by

China's repeated position, preceding the beginning of the invasion, which emphasized the respect of the Minsk-2 agreement as the only solution to the Russian-Ukraine tensions. ⁴An option, nonetheless, which was blatantly neglected by Putin's actions in the following days [*Reuters* 2022, 19 February].

Opposite conclusions, however, were drawn from other actions taken by Chinese authorities in the weeks before the beginning of the invasion.

Some doubts were raised in this respect by the contradictory messages sent by the Chinese embassy in Kyiv to Chinese nationals in Ukraine on the eve of the Russian invasion. Two days before the beginning of Russian invasion, the Chinese Embassy warned Chinese nationals in Ukraine against venturing into «unstable» areas, but it did not advise them, as many other nations did, to leave the country [*Reuters* 2022, 22 February; MOFAPRC 2022b]. A few hours after the beginning of Putin's attack against Ukraine, the Chinese Embassy in Kyiv advised its nationals there to «stay at home» or to display the Chinese flag when they went outside [*China Daily* 2022, 24 February]. The day after, the Embassy reversed its instructions and warned Chinese nationals in Ukraine that it was better «not to» display any Chinese national symbol [PRC Embassy Ukraine 2022].

Other doubts emerged from Chinese state energy companies' unusual behaviour in the months preceding the invasion. As shown by Collins and Miles, «Chinese LNG buyers stood out from every other group of global purchasers in the six months leading up to Russia's invasion [as] they bought more than 91 percent of all global LNG purchased worldwide under term deals». This amount was more than twice the quantity ever bought by Chinese purchasers in one full year. «Had European firms had access to this LNG after the invasion», highlighted the authors, «perceptions of gas scarcity and price spikes may have been much reduced» [Miles & Collins 2023, 12 June].

China's official statements after the invasion called for restraint and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, without explicitly naming Russia as the aggressor or condemning its actions but also without supporting Moscow's move. This is shown by China's abstention at both the 25 February Security Council vote – which denounced the Russian invasion – and the 2 March General Assembly resolution – which demanded the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine [UN General

4. The Minsk II agreement was signed on 12 February 2015 by Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic. It was the second attempt - after the failed Minsk I agreement signed on September 2014 - to resolve the conflict in Eastern Ukraine by establishing a ceasefire, withdrawing heavy weapons, and facilitating the exchange of prisoners. It sought to restore Ukrainian control over state borders, provide for decentralization and special status for Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and ensure the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

Assembly 2022]. The Chinese Ambassador at the UN, Zhang Jun, however, stated that the crisis was the direct result of five successive rounds of NATO's eastward expansion, which affected Russia's legitimate security aspirations. Therefore, by blaming the US and NATO for the escalation, the Ambassador emphasised China's call for common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security. This was an anticipation of the official Global Security Initiative (GSI) to be presented by Xi Jinping in April 2022 as an attempt to provide a new alternative framework for international security cooperation, with the intention of addressing global challenges through dialogue and collaboration, rather than confrontation and alliance-based security mechanisms such as NATO [Sciorati 2023]. The same line was repeated by Vice Foreign Minister Le on 19th March 2022, speaking at the Fourth International Forum on Security and Strategy. Le criticised NATO's bloc politics, search for absolute security, and «weaponisation» of globalisation through unilateral sanctions towards Russia [MOFAPRC 2022c; MOFAPRC 2022d].

In the meantime, the Chinese government, facing Russia's military failure in Ukraine and Western compact reaction in support of Ukraine, quickly backtracked on the by then popular «no limit» formula to define the course of bilateral relations with Russia and restated the three principles of «nonalignment, non-confrontation, and not targeting third parties» as unambiguously formulated in the joint statement issued after Xi Jinping's official visit to Russia on 20-22 March 2022 [MOFAPRC 2023a].

Between June and September 2022, China therefore tried to signal an ongoing rebalance of its position vis-à-vis Moscow and strengthened its contacts with Washington in an attempt to soften the US «great siege» (大围剿) against China. This was the term – as defined by Chinese scholars in memory of the nationalist campaign that forced the CCP to the Long March in the 1930s – by which the Chinese policy implemented by the Biden administration was defined [*Sina* 2022, 1 June]. On 9 June Chinese State Councillor and Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe, during his talks with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin at the 19th IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, stated that China expected to establish sound and stable major-country relations with the US [Embassy of the PRC in the United States, 2022]. On 13 June CCP Politburo Member and Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi had a four hour meeting with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in Luxembourg. According to the official American readout, the two officials had already talked over the phone on 16 May but this time the meeting «included candid, substantive, and productive discussion of a number of regional and global security issues», Ukraine included. According to the official Chinese readout, the two sides, agreed to strengthen contact and dialogue, reduce misunderstanding and miscalculation, and properly manage differences [US Embassy and Consulates in China, 2022; MOFAPRC, 2022e]

One day later, Beijing announced that Le Yucheng no longer served as vice-foreign minister and was appointed as deputy head of the National Radio and Television Administration. This move was interpreted by several analysts as a demotion intended to signal a correction in China's diplomatic course towards Russia [Nakazawa 2022, 23 June]. It was, however, a correction in words but not in deeds.

On 9 September, Vyacheslav Volodin, the chairman of the State Duma held a meeting with the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, Li Zhanshu, in Moscow to prepare the meeting between Xi and Putin to be held a few days later at the margin of the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Uzbekistan. Li stated that the US and NATO were endangering Russia's national security, that China understood and supported Russia on Ukraine and was therefore willing to provide assistance. According to Wu Guoguang, Senior Fellow on Chinese Politics at the Center for China Analysis, the verb chosen by the Chinese official (策应) conveyed the idea of providing support in subtle, strategic and well-coordinated ways behind the scenes [Wu Guoguang, 2023]. Such an unprecedented public endorsement blatantly clashed with Beijing's previous effort to rebalance its «pro-Russian» stance and restate the «three principles» after the outbreak of the war. Sergey N. Goncharov from the Russian Academy of Science, claimed that Li, who was about to step down from the CCP Politburo during the 20th Party Congress to be held in October, probably did not follow given instructions, which showed a certain division among Chinese leaders over the course of Sino-Russian relations on the eve of the Party Congress [Goncharov 2023]. Although Russian official media highlighted this passage, which was presented as the demonstration of China's support for Russian invasion, Chinese media omitted Li's supportive statements. The incident apparently reverberated on the «cold» climate of Xi and Putin meetings in Samarkand one week later in which Putin stressed China's «balanced» position and showed «understanding» for Beijing's concern about the situation [State Duma 2022; *Xinhua*, 2022, 10 September; Tiezzi 2022, 17 September].

These events consolidated China's position over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine as based on a formal redefinition of the «unlimited partnership» and a reaffirmation of the principles of «nonalignment, non-confrontation, and not targeting third parties». This correction allowed China to formally detach from Russian military adventurism while maintaining a *de-facto* alignment towards Moscow, a position that was functional to confront the US and NATO. At the same time it created a broad and flexible neutralist stance with the goal of maximising China's appeal as a rational and peaceful actor among the vast majority of countries that were unwilling to take sides in the Russian-Ukraine conflict. In the light of the growing antagonism between China and the US, along with rising tensions over the Taiwan issue, a careful balance of these two components was enabling China to extract maximum gains for its national security from the Ukraine conflict.

4. *Fighting by «peace»: the evolution of China's «pro-Russian neutrality» in 2023*

On 18 October 2022, in his extensive report at the 20th Congress of the CCP, Xi Jinping did not mention either Ukraine or Russia, but he repeatedly emphasized the concept of security (mentioned 91 times), giving the impression that China was a country under siege by hostile forces. «China must remain on high alert against systemic security risks» claimed Xi [MOFAPRC 2022f].

Russian experts gave a positive assessment of the outcome of the CCP Congress. Alexander Lukin, Acting Head of the Institute of China and Modern Asia, said that the deterioration of China's relations with the West might indicate a wider scope for progress in bilateral Russia-China relations. Aleksey Maslov, Director of the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Lomonosov Moscow State University, added that China might react to Western «siege» with a more assertive foreign policy that would be suitable for the successful development of relations with Russia. Maslov also noticed that China's position on Russia had evolved since the outbreak of the invasion and that, therefore, Russia «should not demand from China what it has never promised» [RIAC 2022].

The same discrepancy between Russia and China's official positions manifested itself once more in the 30 December 2022 virtual meeting between Xi and Putin. In the Russian leader's words, the two countries seemed to be working together against «unprecedented Western pressure and provocation», signalling a sort of synchrony between the «defensive» logic of Russian invasion of Ukraine and Beijing's ongoing manoeuvres in the Taiwan Strait. Putin clearly expressed the intention to strengthen military cooperation with Beijing. In the Chinese account of the meeting, nonetheless, there was no mention whatsoever of this element; it only reported Putin's search for improved cooperation «in various fields», and Xi's position as primarily based on strengthening economic cooperation with Moscow [President of Russia 2022a; MOFAPRC 2022g].

At the end of 2022, the consolidation of Xi's power within the CCP as a result of the 20th Party Congress allowed the Chinese leader to revert back to foreign policy and translate the shift of China's formal position over Russia, matured over the summer, into play. Chinese authorities tried to recalibrate the «pro-Russian» nuances of their previous position by giving more emphasis to a more «neutralist» tone, primarily aimed at driving a wedge between the US and its partners in Europe, weakening Washington's anti-China containment strategy. In October 2022, the Biden administration had intensified its economic offensive against Beijing, focusing on expanding export control and trade sanctions on Chinese companies [Bureau of Industry and Security 2022]. This was part of the Biden administration's broader National Security Strategy, which identified China and Russia as strategic adversaries [White House 2022].

A first signal of China's new formally neutralist stance became apparent in a piece published in both Chinese and Western media on 1 November by Zhou Bo (周波), a former senior colonel in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Zhou criticised Putin's nuclear threat against the West – raised by the Russian leader at the end of September [Faulconbridge 2022, 21 September] – and warned that Putin's threat could negatively influence China's «balanced» position towards Russia: «The last thing Beijing wants now is the deterioration of relations with European countries. When the United States intensifies its competition with China, it is important that Europe is not always on the side of the United States. Putin has admitted that Beijing has “questions and concerns” about the Russian-Ukrainian war. If he uses nuclear weapons, Beijing's response will go far beyond doubts and worries. Can China remain neutral when the whole world protests against Moscow?». The Colonel agreed with Putin in his analysis of the war as a conflict between Russia and the West, not between Russia and Ukraine. Zhou, therefore, suggested that China could mediate to persuade Putin not to use nuclear weapons. This would involve an exchange where NATO formally committed not to further expand, addressing the concerns that led to the nuclear threat, which Zhou saw as a response to NATO's expansion [Zhou 2022, 27 October; 2022, 1 November].

China's initiative fully developed in February 2023, on the eve of the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On 18 February, Wang Yi, a member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, delivered a keynote speech at the 59th Munich Security Conference, calling for China and Europe to partner up to prevent the outbreak of a «new Cold War». Wang also announced that the Chinese side would put forward «China's position on the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis» and a Global Security Initiative Concept Paper to «lay out more practical measures to address current security challenges» [PRCEU 2023; MOFAPRC 2023b].

Three days later, the Chinese government published the GSI paper, which served as a sequel to Xi's first introduction of the GSI in April 2022. The paper restated the principles of «sovereign equality and non-interference in internal affairs», condemned nuclear war, military pressure, and sanctions, and promoted political dialogue as a means of resolving international crises, including the situation in Ukraine [MOFAPRC 2023c; Sciorati 2023].

On February 24, 2023, marking one year since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs unveiled a «peace plan» for the political resolution of the Ukraine crisis, outlining China's «objective and just position» [MOFAPRC 2023d; 2023e].

While the plan, according to Chinese propaganda, was meant to provide a framework for peace, it appeared more as a «position plan» merely aimed at promoting China's diplomatic principles and its stance on global governance. As such its direct contribution to a solution of the specific com-

plexities of the Ukraine conflict – consistently referred to as a mere «crisis» – would be minimal.⁵

Most of the points raised in the plan lacked specific mechanisms for implementation and enforcement. This was the case with the call for an immediate ceasefire (point 3), the resumption of peace talks (point 4), the resolution of the humanitarian crisis (point 5), the protection of civilians and POWs (point 6), the safety of nuclear power plants (point 7), and the promotion of a European security architecture (point 12).

The first and most important point, «Respecting the sovereignty of all countries», asserted that the «sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of all countries must be effectively upheld» in line with the «purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter». While this primarily reflected Beijing's stance on Taiwan, considered by Beijing as an integral part of the People's Republic of China, this point was open to contrasting interpretations by Russia and Ukraine. Russia could view it as an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of its 2022 annexations in eastern Ukraine, while Kiev was likely to see it as an affirmation of the intangibility of its internationally recognized borders as they existed before Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Other points, such as the abandonment of bloc politics (point 1) and unilateral sanctions (point 10), indirectly supported Russia by attributing the current instability to NATO and subtly promoting China's GSI as an efficient alternative. These points also appealed to European constituencies inclined to avoid escalation, seek conflict resolution, and alleviate economic impacts. More specifically, European fears were addressed through the emphasis given to avoiding the use of nuclear weapons (point 8), maintaining the stability of industrial and supply chains (point 11), and addressing China's role in post-conflict reconstruction (point 12).

China's «peace plan» therefore appeared to consolidate its «pro-Russian neutrality», reflecting the original inspiration of China's anti-hegemonic foreign policy strategy. It employed «peace» as a means to isolate the US and NATO, protect Putin's Russia, drive a wedge between Washington and its European allies, and promote China's proposals for an alternative global governance in the Global South.

In an insightful analysis of China's peace plan, Vasily Kashin, Director of the Centre for Integrated European and International Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, emphasised that Beijing would use the document to consolidate efforts with countries not involved in the conflict and countries that had not joined the sanctions

5. China seemed however much more active in its condemnation of Putin's use of nuclear threat towards Ukraine. In a meeting held in early November with German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz, the Chinese leader made an indirect but clear criticism of his Russian partner by stating that the international community should jointly oppose the use of, or threats to use, nuclear weapons. [*Politico*, 2022, 4 November]

against Moscow. Kashin asserted that the 12 points included in the Chinese Plan could serve as an alternative to permanent anti-Russian resolutions at the UN General Assembly, as draft resolutions based on these points could be «neutral, restrained, and have a real chance of gaining a majority of votes» [Zakvasin 2023, 24 February].

Deng Yuwen, a prominent Chinese public intellectual and visiting scholar at the Institute of China Policy at the University of Nottingham, wrote at the time that Beijing aimed at «flying the banner of maintaining world peace» and gaining the support of states opposing to or suspicious of the US. The goal was to weaken US influence, as Beijing believed that after defeating Russia, the US would turn against China. Beijing's main objectives, therefore, were to keep the war ongoing to distract the US from containing China, weaken Russia's national power to make it more dependent on Beijing, and, at the same time, preserve Putin's regime through fruitful economic support. Deng described this strategy as Beijing's yin/yang duality; while the international community saw only the yang side – China's stance on peace – the yin side – weakening US influence – remained hidden behind beautiful diplomatic words [Deng 2023, 27 February].

Deng's «yin and yang» metaphor well applies to Xi Jinping's state visit to Russia on 20 March 2023. The visit followed China's «diplomatic coup» on 10 March, which led to the pompous inauguration – staged in Beijing, but de facto brokered by Iraq and Oman – of the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia to resume diplomatic relations; a move that was meant to show the world a first successful practical outcome of China's GSI and China's capacity to use «peace» as a functional tool to gain diplomatic and strategic depth at the expenses of US traditional influence in the region [Xinhua 2023, 11 March].

The visit in Moscow was meant to further expand China's manoeuvre. Putin welcomed Xi, praising China's «objective and impartial» position shown in its «peace plan» and reaffirming his commitment to the resumption of peace talks [MOFAPRC 2023f]. The two leaders signed the «Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development». This comprehensive document aimed at promoting bilateral cooperation on the basis of the three basic principles of non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-targeting of third countries [President of Russia 2022b]. Behind the scenes, as revealed by Alexander Gabuev, both sides appeared to be making efforts to further strengthen their defence partnership. According to the Russian expert, «over half of Putin's team engaged in discussions with Xi Jinping were involved in Russia's weapons and space programmes with the primary objective of deepening defence cooperation with China» [Gabuev 2023, 12 April]. Professor Tian Feilong, a prominent hard-line intellectual affiliated with Beihang University's Law School in Beijing, went so far to draw comparisons

between this document and the «Atlantic Charter» of 1941 in which U.S. President F.D. Roosevelt - not yet being a participant in the second world war – outlined a shared vision with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill that laid the foundation of the post-war international order [Tian 2023, 23 March].

When, at the end of June 2023, Russia was suddenly shaken by the uprising caused by the leader of the Wagner group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Beijing's reaction was cautious and subdued. Officially, China followed its typical approach to avoid direct involvement in the internal affairs of other nations, describing the event as Russia's internal affair and supporting Russia in maintaining national stability [*Xinhua* 2023, 26 June; Hu 2023, 27 June]. However, the incident reportedly caused some concern in China, given the CCP's historical sensitivity to warlords, and it was used by the government to restate its own narrative on China's model of political control over the army [Chen 2023, 25 June; Przychodniak 2023, 12 October]. Prigozhin's words about corruption in the Russian army were not censored in Chinese media and seemingly served as a boost to the CCP to launch a new wave of the anticorruption campaign, which hit the PLA over the summer, causing the removal of eleven generals and the detention of Defence Minister Li Shangfu [Allen-Ebrahimian 2023, 31 December].

Although the last part of 2023 saw a partial détente in the relations between the US and China, symbolised by the Xi-Biden meeting in San Francisco in November, Sino-Russian relations progressed quite steadily. This was shown by Putin's official visit at the Third Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing and Russia-China coordination over the crisis in Gaza [President of Russia 2023]. Both countries publicly expressed support for the Palestinians, never condemned Hamas' attacks, and jointly challenged US support for Israel [United Nations 2023]. Russia played the role of the «bad cop», comparing Israeli actions to Nazism and hosting the Hamas leadership in Moscow [*Reuters* 2023, 13 October; Roth 2023, 26 October]. China, on the other hand, reiterated the same formula applied over the war in Ukraine and positioned itself into a «pro-Palestinian neutrality». It presented another vague «peace plan», mainly aimed to expand China's influence in the pro-Palestinian front, and, at the same time, decried US support for Israel as a threat to regional stability [MOFAPRC 2023g].

In a call between Xi and Putin on 31 December 2023, the two leaders expressed profound satisfaction with the development of bilateral relations. Particular emphasis was given to the robust growth of their economic relations despite the weight of Western sanctions on Russia [Embassy of the PRC in the UAE 2023]. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, China, as one of the world's top oil consumers, became, in fact, a significant economic lifeline for Russia. Half of Russia's oil and petroleum exports were directed to China in 2023 (19% of PRC total imports), with a rise of 23% that allowed Moscow to overtake Saudi Arabia as China's largest crude oil supplier for

the year [US Energy Information Administration 2023; Soldatkin & Astakhova 2023, 27 December].

This evolution boosted the use of yuan in bilateral trade helping the yuan overtake the Japanese yen as the fourth-most used currency by value in global payments [Zhang 2023, 22 December]. As stated by Russia's Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullina in January 2024, the use of the Chinese yuan to pay for Russian exports has increased 86 times to 34.5% of total payments since 2022 [Yahoo 2024, 30 January]. At the same time, in 2023, Chinese shipments to Russia skyrocketed, indicating a growing dependence of Russia on Chinese goods, a factor that has generated a debate in the West on Russia's «vassalage» towards Beijing [Reuters 2024, 12 January; Gabuev 2022, 9 August; Beytout 2023, 22 May; Burns 2024, 30 January].

5. Conclusion: when history rhymes: China's Russian policy in perspective

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, its leaders, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, have sought to reshape the global political landscape. Their objective has been to rectify the «humiliation» inflicted by Western imperialism and to secure a «legitimate» space and status for China, thereby restoring its lost prestige and re-establishing Beijing's lost regional and global authority. This ambition to reclaim «centrality» in the international arena has manifested itself in the persistent effort to undermine the dominance of superpowers such as the United States and the Soviet Union. Hence China has persistently aimed to create an alternative, China-led pole that could gradually influence global governance, ensuring the nation's security and prosperity.

Consequently, the People's Republic of China has never fully aligned itself with the prevailing global orders – whether the bipolar structure of the Cold War or the subsequent US-led «liberal» order. Instead, China has navigated within these systems to maximize its benefits while simultaneously attempting to transform them from within. This dual approach has aimed both to mitigate these orders' impact on China's political stability and to foster the emergence of a new system that could elevate China's global standing.

A consistent element of this strategy has been the anti-hegemonic orientation of Beijing's foreign policy. Since its inception, China has framed its policies around a global effort to counteract the hegemony of alien powers, which was perceived by Chinese leaders as a significant threat to the legitimate space they sought to create. This approach has involved the implementation of two primary initiatives. First, China has endeavored to build a broad anti-hegemonic coalition, leveraging its alignment with the developing world to confront and weaken those powers which it perceives as most antagonistic. Second, China has tried to promote the establishment of

a new order; free from adversarial forms of hegemony and therefore prone to favor Beijing's ascent to the center stage of the international system [Fardella & She, 2024]

In the years that followed China's entry in the WTO in 2001 and the Lehman Brothers crisis of 2007, the strengthening of China's economic and political sway on a global scale appeared to the Chinese leadership to parallel the waning of US hegemony. Subsequently, Beijing embarked upon a proactive foreign policy agenda, designed to mitigate American influence and to cultivate fresh markets and alternative frameworks of global governance, with the objective to bolster China's global power and revise the US led international order. The logic of the deepening of Beijing's alignment with Russia and China's position over the Ukraine war fits within this strategic rationale.

The Sino-Russian Joint Statement issued on June 2021 at the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the historical Treaty signed by the two partners in 2001 summarised the logic of bilateral relations with a specific formula: «Russia needs a prosperous and stable China, and China needs a strong and successful Russia» (俄罗斯需要繁荣稳定的中国, 中国需要强大成功的俄罗斯) [Joint Statement 2021]. In this context, such a formula suggested that China believed its geopolitical interests were better served by a Russia that was both powerful and successful. The statement emerged during the consolidation of the Sino-Russian «unlimited partnership», a delicate moment indeed as the massing of Russian troops at the border with Ukraine started rising fears of a new Russian aggression towards its neighbour. The same «strong and successful» formula, however, appeared also in the Joint Statement issued in March 2023 after Xi and Putin's meeting in Moscow. This meeting de facto sanctioned the «new» formal framework of bilateral relations under the traditional «three basic principles» – non-alignment, non-confrontation, and not targeting third parties – and China's «pro-Russian neutrality» as its corollary. If the disappearance of the «unlimited» formula suggested a formal discontinuity, the perseverance of the «strong and successful» logic guaranteed conceptual continuity [MOFAPRC 2023a].

As highlighted by Goncharov, the three principles stemmed primarily from China's tragic experience as USSR's junior ally that led to the Korean War, the internationalisation of the Taiwan issue and a thirty-year isolation from the West [Goncharov 2023]. This historical inheritance influenced the following trajectory of China's independent stance in the international system, preventing it from formally translating any potential alignment into formal alliances.

The risk that a badly planned Russian military adventure dragged China's new «alliance» with Moscow into a global confrontation with a galvanised West forcing Beijing into a premature confrontation over Taiwan certainly played a pivotal role in the sudden correction of China's official position. A

relevant role was also played in this respect by the steady political, military and economic response of the West to Putin's actions in Ukraine but, quite probably, also by Xi's domestic urge, in sight of the 20th CCP Congress, to smoothen the antagonistic factions within the Party that challenged its assertive foreign and domestic policies. In short, the historical experience of non-alignment well served the interest of the present and influenced China's political tuning of its formal position away from the «unlimited partnership» formula and towards the traditional «three basic principles».

It was an efficient adaptation that combined a formal discontinuity, inspired by the historical experience of non-alignment, with a logical continuity required by the current reality; a stratagem that made China's diplomatic action more efficient thanks to the association of its strategic entente with Moscow to a more flexible anti-hegemonic manoeuvre in the «neutralist» camp (the new version of Mao's «intermediate zones»).

At the time of the formation of the Sino-Soviet alliance, China acted as a junior partner in the relationship, and it was this very same nature that generated Mao's frustrations and the subsequent decoupling of China's national interest from the «two camps» framework. The nature of Sino-Russian relations today, however, is diametrically different, with China playing the role of the senior partner, and Russia being progressively perceived as a «vassal». As a consequence, Beijing is now in a much more favourable position to manage its relations with Russia in a direction that favours its national interest and its global ambitions.

Professor Zhao Huasheng, of the Center for Russian and Central Asian Studies at Fudan University, recently wrote that the role of Russia is crucial for China to maintain security and stability at its continental periphery, particularly at a time of intensifying Western pressures in the Indo-Pacific. In case of an escalation over Taiwan, Russia's support would be crucial for China's energy security and resistance against Western sanctions. Furthermore, as a major nuclear power and a member of the UN Security Council, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the BRICS, Russia plays a strategic role in China's attempt to shape a new international order [Zhao 2022, 24 January].

China and Russia's horizons, however, as Professor Feng Yujun noted, do not always align. «The imperial logic underlying both the rejection of Ukraine as a national entity and the overt claim to restore [Russia's] traditional territories is alarming [...] It is clear that this conception of "cultural boundaries instead of actual sovereign boundaries" [...] is in essence no different from the West's [belief in] "the primacy of human rights over sovereignty"» [Feng 2023, 17 January].

China has always tried to «formally» detach itself from this logic, which recalls Russian imperialist voracity of Chinese territory in the first part of the 20th century. As a consequence, Beijing has advocated – more in words than in deeds in fact – the preservation of Ukraine's sovereignty and

territorial integrity and it has not «formally» supported Russia's military actions nor recognized the independence of Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk.

In the eyes of some among the most renowned Chinese analysts, Russia's military adventurism, in fact, accelerated the emergence of a new «bloc confrontation», reinforcing the US hegemonic outreach over its allies – through the expansion of NATO at the expense of EU strategic autonomy – and provoked an escalation of its pressure over the South China Sea and, most importantly, Taiwan [CICIR 2023; Wang 2023, 24 February].

The adaptation of China's formal position reflected this reality and, based on China's historical experience, called for a more flexible and independent anti-hegemonic course that better preserved China's national interests. As a result, China corrected Russia's formal positioning in Beijing's official horizon, without, nonetheless, altering its strategic value. Beijing needed a «strong and successful» Russia to enhance its continental security and keep Western antagonism away from Chinese shores. At the same time, it played «peace» to drive a wedge between the US and Europe and lead the neutral «intermediate zones» (i.e. Middle East). The aim was to shield Russia from the diplomatic manoeuvre of the West and promote China's reform of global governance, officially presented in September 2023 [MOFAPRC 2023h]. All this, as Deng Yuwen explained, is supposed to increase China's political leverage over Russia and strengthen Beijing's economic security [Deng 2023, 27 February].

A formalized «unlimited» partnership with Russia therefore risked to jeopardize Beijing's strategic horizons by limiting China's diplomatic flexibility towards the West and the appeal of its «neutralist» stance on the developing world. The substantial alignment with a «strong and successful» Russia, the latter being demoted to the status of junior partner, has nonetheless become a fundamental component of Beijing attempt to achieve its regional and global ambitions. This explains the rationale behind Beijing's ambiguity over Russia's invasion of Ukraine and better indicates the scope of Beijing's interests in its potential outcomes.

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