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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Don't let a good crisis go to waste: China's response to the Russia–Ukraine war

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Abstract

This article examines Beijing's reactions to, and perceptions of, Russia's war against Ukraine, and it draws on Neoclassical Realism to explain the motives and objectives underlying the Chinese response. It argues that Beijing has adopted somewhat ambivalent, but consistently pro-Russian policies in response to the invasion. These policies include conspicuous rhetorical and diplomatic backing and continued economic engagement with Russia, mixed with restraint in the provision of substantial material—particularly military—support for Moscow, along with an insistence that China remains a 'neutral' party in the conflict. The article inquires why Beijing has opted to provide consistent (albeit discreet and often indirect) support for Russia in connection with its war against Ukraine, in spite of various negative long-term consequences it risks incurring as a result. It proposes that China's overall policy response has been driven by a combination of geopolitical (systemic) and domestic-level (regime security and ideological) considerations.

Keywords China · Russia · Ukraine · Neoclassical realism · Russia-Ukraine war · Sino-Russian relations

Introduction

For China, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ongoing war that ensued has been a momentous event. It is no exaggeration to say that China plays a more important (albeit indirect) role in the events surrounding the Ukraine war than any other Indo-Pacific power, bar the United States and Russia itself. Nonetheless, the official Chinese reaction has been very understated and

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has taken great pains to portray Beijing as a neutral, passive, yet responsible actor that does not have a major stake in the conflict. Owing to its deep strategic links with Russia and its enormous importance as a global actor, however, nothing could be further from the truth.

The invasion of Ukraine did not come out of the blue. Prior to crossing Ukraine's borders, roughly 200,000 Russian troops had taken half a year to amass nearby in plain sight. Their movements, as well as the Kremlin's likely strategic objectives, were minutely (and publicly) documented by US and other Western intelligence services. While speculations about a Russian invasion abounded in global media since late 2021, Chinese officials, diplomats, and state media were seemingly oblivious of the danger, reacting to Western warnings of an impending conflict with a mixture of ridicule and accusations of warmongering (Sun 2022). No attempts were made to evacuate the approximately 6000 Chinese citizens in Ukraine prior to the invasion.

Notwithstanding the conspicuous unawareness of most Chinese officials, it is difficult to assess whether China's top leadership may have had any prior knowledge of President Vladimir Putin's war plans. Less than three weeks before the invasion, on 4–5 February, Putin had travelled to Beijing for an official visit. Amid much fanfare, both heads of state had signed a raft of new agreements and pronounced a "no limits" bilateral partnership in a sweeping joint statement that was rife with anti-Western rhetoric, including a condemnation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its ongoing enlargement (President of Russia 2022). Beijing and Moscow not only forcefully reaffirmed their strategic partnership, but appeared to lift it to a new level.

US intelligence sources have indicated that China's top leadership was likely aware of Moscow's invasion plans by the time of Putin's visit and might in fact have requested that the Kremlin delay its offensive until after the successful conclusion of the Beijing Winter Olympics on 20 February (Wong and Barnes 2022). In the event, Russia's operation to conquer Ukraine commenced exactly one day later, on 21 February, when the Kremlin announced that it would formally recognize the separatist Donbas republics and started to dispatch official Russian 'peacekeeping' troops to the separatist territories—a prelude to the wholesale invasion of the remainder of Ukraine which began two-and-a-half days later. Among the invasion forces were large contingents of troops from the Russian Far East, leaving Russia's border with China unprecedentedly exposed, a testament to Moscow's high level of trust in Beijing.

This article examines Beijing's reactions to, and perceptions of, Russia's war against Ukraine, and it draws on a Neoclassical Realist perspective to explain the motives and objectives underlying the Chinese response. Overall, it argues that Beijing has adopted somewhat ambivalent but consistently supportive policies in response to Russia's invasion. These policies constitute a mixture of, on the one hand, conspicuous rhetorical and diplomatic backing and continued economic engagement with Russia and, on the other hand, a marked restraint in the provision of substantial material—particularly military—support for Russia, along with an insistence that China remains a 'neutral' party in the conflict. Beijing's 'halfway-house' strategy is somewhat puzzling, since it appears to yield the worst of both worlds for China: alienating its neighbors and heightening threat perceptions among

Western states, whilst contributing relatively little to actually help its strategic partner Russia win the war in Ukraine.

The article assumes that, on the whole, it is not difficult to understand why Beijing has refrained from fully committing itself to openly supporting Moscow's war effort, since there are various reasons why backing Russia comes at a cost for Beijing. These costs and risks (which are described in detail in the section 'The costs of China's support for Russia') can be broadly divided into geopolitical, economic, and normative-reputational factors: China risks being dragged into Russia's geopolitical conflicts whilst rousing suspicions among its neighbors and trading partners; it risks jeopardizing its long-term economic relations with Western states; and it risks undermining its own credibility as a champion of sovereignty, the only concrete international normative principle that it has consistently advocated. The article has therefore been centered on investigating the following primary research question: '*Why has China opted to provide consistent (albeit discreet and often indirect) support for Russia in connection with its war against Ukraine, in spite of the negative longer-term consequences it risks incurring as a result?*' In response to this question, the article proposes the following hypothesis: '*China's overall policy response to Russia's actions in Ukraine has largely been driven by a combination of geopolitical* (*systemic*) *and domestic-level (regime security and ideological) considerations.*'

The remainder of the article will be structured as follows: The next section outlines Beijing's policy reactions to the war in Ukraine, particularly its consistent diplomatic and political support for Moscow, as well as the development of China's economic ties with Russia since the invasion began. The following section describes the (geopolitical, economic, and normative-reputational) costs and risks attached to Beijing's policy of supporting Russia. This is followed by a brief section that establishes the theoretical approach used in this article, which is based on Neoclassical Realism. The remaining two sections analyze the significance of the independent variable (geopolitics and systemic power relations) and the intervening variable (Xi Jinping's domestic regime security concerns and ideological convictions), respectively.

China's policy reactions to the war in Ukraine

Since the day of the invasion, Beijing has been hesitant to adopt a clear position on the events in Ukraine. It has neither formally endorsed nor condemned Russia's actions. Notwithstanding its persistent claims of neutrality with regard to the war, China's government has made concerted efforts to shield Russia diplomatically from the political fallout of the invasion, whether by repeatedly reaffirming the strength of its bilateral partnership with Moscow, or by casting favorable votes in international forums like the United Nations (UN). Beijing opted to abstain in UN Security Council and General Assembly votes condemning Russia's invasion in February and March 2022 (Nichols 2022), as well as a Security Council vote in September condemning Moscow's annexation of large parts of Ukraine. In another Security Council vote in March on a resolution about the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, China was the only country to vote with Russia (United Nations 2022). Beijing likewise

joined Moscow in early April 2022 in voting against a General Assembly motion to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council (Finnis 2022). Furthermore, it voted in tandem with Russia to oppose Ukraine-related motions inside several UN-affiliated subordinate bodies, including the Human Rights Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency, sometimes as the only state present to do so (ReliefWeb 2022; Murphy 2022). This pattern was repeated during Ukraine-related decisions at the G20 (Feng 2022), in a key ruling at the International Court of Justice (Borger 2022a), and at virtually all subsequent major votes within UN institutions.

Mirroring Russia's official narrative, the Chinese government and state media have consistently maintained that the West bears the responsibility for the war in Ukraine since, by pursuing NATO enlargement, the US and its allies had backed Russia into a corner. From the first day of the invasion, the press releases of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs have attributed the conflict to the enlargement of NATO, with Assistant Foreign Minister Hua Chunying invoking the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 as an example of NATO's own track record of invasion and purported aggression (MOFAPRC 2022c, 24 February). Chinese officials have also constantly faulted the West for allegedly prolonging the conflict by providing Ukraine with a steady stream of weapons. In a particularly revealing statement of Beijing's position on the Ukraine war, China's then-top-legislator Li Zhanshu—a close ally of President Xi Jinping and third-ranking leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—stated in an address to the Russian parliament in September 2022 that "China understands and supports Russia" with regard to Ukraine. Li added that "We see that the United States and its NATO allies are expanding their presence near the Russian borders, seriously threatening national security and the lives of Russian citizens. We have full understanding for all measures Russia is taking to protect such key interests, we are providing our assistance". Furthermore, Li claimed that "On the Ukrainian issue, we see how they put Russia in an inescapable position. And in this case, Russia made an important choice, to push back decisively" (State Duma 2022).

Chinese officials and news sources have criticized Washington's Western allies for allegedly subordinating themselves to US interests in their response to the conflict (Le 2022). They have consistently refrained from labelling the events in Ukraine an "invasion". Following initial hesitation, however, they began to intermittently label them a "war", thereby deviating from Russia's own official terminology. Up until the day of the invasion, Foreign Ministry spokespersons had still decried global media speculation about an impending "war" as hyped-up efforts to sow panic and exaggerate tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Three days after the invasion, the Chinese Ambassador in Ukraine, Fan Xianrong, first described the military conflict as a "war" and called for empathy and understanding toward the Ukrainians, adding that the Chinese government respects Ukraine's national sovereignty and territorial integrity (Fan 2022). Several days later, when China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi called Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, the language of warfare (*zhanshi*) was strategically used to acknowledge the severity of the situation without pointing fingers at the belligerent (MOFAPRC 2022d, 1 March). Subsequently, the reality of there being a "war" between Russia and Ukraine was also acknowledged by President Xi in his speech at a virtual summit on 8 March 2022, where he used

the expression "*zhanhuo*", or "conflagration", whilst further dodging the question of Russia's responsibility (MOFAPRC 2022f, 8 March). In general, Chinese government representatives still tend to avoid labelling the conflict in Ukraine a "war".

Chinese officials have been particularly vociferous in their rejection of the broad set of sanctions that Washington and its allies have imposed on Russia. China's foreign ministry, in its press releases both prior to and after the start of the war, consistently urged to deescalate the Russian-Ukrainian tensions through "political and diplomatic solutions", i.e., dialogue and negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv. By contrast, the ministry has harshly condemned any attempts to either attain a "military solution" to the conflict by providing weapons and ammunition, or an "economic solution" in the form of sanctions (MOFAPRC 2022c, 24 February). Almost half of the foreign ministry press releases published in 2022 that contain references to the Russia-Ukraine conflict have explicitly alleged that sanctions only further deteriorate the situation and, as unilateral acts, have no legal basis in international law.

Prior to Russia's invasion, the Chinese foreign ministry's official vision of what "political and diplomatic solutions" to the Russia-Ukraine tensions should entail was mainly framed with reference to the Minsk-2 agreement as the only way out of the ongoing crisis (MOFAPRC 2022b, 19 February). Signed in 2015, this agreement, which is commonly seen as favoring Moscow, prioritized a ceasefire over the protection of Ukrainian sovereignty. At the time, the Chinese foreign ministry's continuous reference to the Minsk-2 agreement exemplified a strong overlap with the Russian official narrative. After Putin launched his full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022 in a flagrant breach of the agreement, Minsk-2 was also dropped from the Chinese foreign ministry's official statements. Instead, the Charter of the United Nations replaced Minsk-2 as the main reference point based on which the Chinese leadership claimed to develop a 'coordinated' response to the conflict. Whilst presenting itself as a mediator, it took Beijing an entire year to finally publish an official peace proposal "on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis" in February 2023, in the context of Wang Yi's strategic visits to European capitals and Moscow. Rather than a concrete roadmap to peace, however, the twelve-point document has been described as a vague, non-committal "laundry list of familiar Chinese talking points about the war", and its contents has been received more positively in Moscow than in Kyiv, Washington, or Brussels (Gabuev 2023).

China's state-controlled and heavily-censored mass media, in their coverage of the war in Ukraine, have closely stuck to the talking points laid out by government officials. While Chinese news outlets have occasionally reported on the destruction and suffering caused by the war in Ukraine, on the whole they have adopted a distinctly pro-Russian stance. On countless occasions, China's leading mass media have reposted and amplified the official pronouncements of Russian government representatives (Cooper et al. 2022). This was particularly conspicuous after Moscow began to make unsubstantiated allegations about purported US-run biological weapons laboratories in eastern Ukraine in March 2022, which received extremely wide-ranging coverage in China (Young 2022) and were repeatedly endorsed by foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian (see MOFAPRC 2022i, 8 April 2022). The amplification of Russian propaganda narratives about the Ukraine war in Chinese

media is reflective of Beijing's and Moscow's long-standing efforts to deepen mutual cooperation between their government-controlled media corporations, which have signed a series of major agreements in recent years to publish mutually approved contents and mirror each other's official narratives (Drinhausen and Solonina 2020).

As regards China's responses in the field of *economics and trade*, the outbreak of the war confronted Beijing with difficult choices regarding how to structure its future economic partnership with Moscow. The raft of financial sanctions imposed on Russia in the first weeks of the war, including bans on using the financial messaging network SWIFT and on insuring Russian commercial shipping, complicated many transactions between both countries. They also led Beijing and Moscow to intensify their efforts to "de-dollarize" bilateral trade, around 70 percent of which had still been conducted in foreign currencies prior to the war (Bloomberg 2022b).

These complications notwithstanding, overall Sino-Russian trade has increased substantially since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, particularly due to the growth of Russian energy exports. Throughout 2022, China imported US$114.15 billion worth of goods from Russia, a 44 percent increase on 2021, while Chinese exports to Russia grew by 13 percent to US$76.1 billion—a year-on-year bilateral trade increase of 29.3 percent (China General Administration of Customs 2023). From the start of the war to early August 2022, China bought US$35 billion worth of oil, oil products, gas, and coal from Russia, compared to US$20 billion for the same period in 2021 (Tan 2022). In an attempt to redirect its energy sales away from Europe, Moscow offered Beijing hefty price discounts of up to US$30 per barrel oil (Moscow Times 2022a), up to 50 percent for natural gas (Sor 2022), and up to 50 percent for coal (Moscow Times 2022a). Despite its general willingness to support its strategic partner in its confrontation with the West, Beijing reportedly bargained hard to obtain as favorable price terms as possible from Russia (Moscow Times 2022b), which Moscow had to accept for lack of alternative export outlets. Consequently, Russia rose to become the largest supplier of oil to China in 2022, its liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports to China in the first half of 2022 were 29 percent higher than in the corresponding period of 2021 (Sor 2022), and its coal exports to China likewise reached record levels, with monthly exports in August 2022 being 57 percent higher than in August 2021 (Xu 2022).

In spite of this dynamic growth, there are limits to the volumes of energy and commodity imports that China has been able to absorb from Russia, particularly in light of a slowing Chinese economy and a lack of essential transport infrastructure. Following a peak in May 2022, China's imports of oil from Russia began to shrink again, although they remained significantly higher than in 2021. When its domestic demand for gas was oversaturated in summer, China even began to resell excess Russian LNG to European consumers on the spot market (Moscow Times 2022b). Since the invasion of Ukraine, Chinese companies have also been hesitant to increase their investments in Russia's upstream energy sector as Western firms were rapidly selling their assets there, although Chinese construction businesses have increasingly been contracted to build energy extraction and transshipment infrastructure (such as LNG terminals) in Russia.

An even more complex picture has emerged in the financial sphere. Already shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, major Chinese state-owned banks began

to restrict financing for Russian oil and commodity purchases to avoid being targeted with secondary sanctions. Chinese banks have tried diverse strategies to maintain their business links with sanctioned Russian clients, such as passing some of their business to smaller, domestically-focused banks with little international exposure (Tham and Zhu 2022). China's UnionPay card payment system, a potential alternative for Moscow to Western bank card service providers, refused to cooperate with any Russian banks subject to Western sanctions (Moscow Times 2022c). Beijing-dominated multilateral financial initiatives have been equally cautious about continued engagement with Russia. Both the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Shanghai-based New Development Bank announced in March 2022 that they would pause all activities relating to Russia and Belarus, due to the conflict in Ukraine (Kinder et al. 2022; New Development Bank 2022). In addition, China suspended all planned investments under its Belt-and-Road-Initiative in Russia, which consequently dropped to zero during the first half of 2022, from US$2 billion over the same period in 2021 (Moscow Times 2022d).

China's growing energy and commodity imports from Russia put a spotlight on Beijing's role as an indispensable economic outlet for Moscow. Sino-Russian trade relations are of crucial importance not only in commercial, but also in geopolitical terms, since they have been a vital factor in enabling Moscow to withstand and circumvent Western economic pressure. Besides securing a steady flow of export profits into Moscow's war coffers, trade relations with China have also enabled Russia to retain critical access to otherwise blocked global markets. For instance, in the weeks following Russia's invasion, China's government-owned shipping company Cosco was the only major shipping line that was still operating in Russia, thus providing a lifeline for its maritime trade (Rivero 2022). Most notably, China has played an important role in providing replacement technologies—from commercial IT equipment and specialized components for manufactured goods to microchips for civilian and military use—to substitute for the Western products and spare parts that can no longer enter the Russian market.

Beijing does not seem to have presented Moscow with a wide-open conduit to circumvent import sanctions. Prominent Chinese entities have in fact complied with most Western sanctions measures and have been cautious not to provide a *conspicuous* conduit for 'backfilling' banned goods into Russia. This was reflected in Beijing's unwillingness to supply Russia with spare parts for Western-designed civilian aircraft, as well as the decision of Chinese technology giant Huawei to suspend its official sales contracts in Russia, close its Russian online store, and relocate staff from Russia to Central Asia (Tyunyaeva and Kurasheva 2022). Besides Huawei, other Chinese electronics companies, such as Xiaomi, Lenovo, Honor, and Oppo quietly left the Russian market in order to avoid falling under secondary sanctions. Similarly, some Chinese car makers, such as Chery and Weichai, suspended their cooperation with Russian manufacturers (Lvova 2022; Ilyushenkov 2022).

This notwithstanding, although a lot of major Chinese consumer goods companies suspended or limited their official sales in Russia, many of them are simultaneously working to facilitate 'parallel imports' by effectively building a two-tiered infrastructure that involves relocating their operations to neighboring states and using intermediaries to deliver their goods to Russia (Tyunyaeva and

Kurasheva 2022). Lesser-known, more domestically-oriented Chinese enterprises with few economic and financial ties to Western markets have begun to flock into the Russian consumer market, particularly for electronics, and some Chinese cities on the border with Russia have reportedly become export hubs for Western-produced spare parts (Tian 2022). Chinese goods and gadgets have begun to dominate most sectors of the Russian market, particularly automobiles and electronics, with experts projecting that Chinese imports will soon account for 90 percent of all sales of 'smart' devices in Russia (Kornev and Korolev 2022).

Overall, China has begun to play an essential role as a purveyor of otherwise unobtainable replacement technologies for its Russian partners—raising questions as to whether it is prepared to provide lethal military aid to Moscow as well. Following hours-long discussions in March 2022, high-ranking Chinese government representatives informed senior US government officials that "they have already decided" to provide economic and financial relief to Russia and were considering providing military supplies as well (Borger 2022b). In February and March 2023, senior US intelligence and government officials stated that they were "confident that the Chinese leadership is considering the provision of lethal equipment" to Russia (Kube and Lee 2023). Based on multiple threads of intelligence, they claimed that China's Central Military Commission (which is chaired by Xi Jinping) had already approved the incremental provision of weapons, including ammunition and artillery supplies, to Russia, but wanted any shipments to remain secret (Hawkins 2023). Beijing vigorously denied these claims. The publication of these intelligence findings was accompanied by a flurry of coordinated diplomatic activity, as the leaders and foreign ministers of the US, EU, and several European states approached their Chinese counterparts with unusually stern and public warnings to refrain from such deliveries, lest there be serious repercussions. As US intelligence officials acknowledged, the publication of the intelligence and the coordinated diplomatic offensive were "intended to deter China from deciding to provide Russia with lethal aid" (Kube and Lee 2023), which they feared would otherwise have been forthcoming.

So far, there has been no concrete evidence of Xi Jinping's administration directly transferring weapons or other lethal assistance to Russia. However, shipments from China to Russia of certain dual-use items that are suitable for military use (including semiconductors and integrated circuits) rose sharply in 2022, compared to the previous year (Spegele 2022). By early 2023, Ukrainian forces reported finding a steadily growing number of Chinese components in Russian weapons used in Ukraine, as well as Chinese-produced ammunition, but whether these were deliberately supplied to Russia's military remained unclear (Williams and O'Donnell 2023; Kyodo 2023). Customs records from 2022 and 2023 depict what appears to have been a well-concealed but steady stream of dual-use goods (such as drones), but also more evidently combat-related goods (such as gunpowder, assault weapons, body armor, or thermal optical sights) flowing from China into Russia (Aarup et al. 2023). Meanwhile, Washington imposed sanctions on various Chinese enterprises under suspicion of having aided Russia's military (Williams and O'Donnell 2023).

The costs of China's support for Russia: why Beijing's reaction is not self-explanatory

Notwithstanding its constant proclamations of neutrality, Beijing has de facto cautiously taken the side of Russia in the conflict over Ukraine. It has done so in spite of the fact that there are a host of negative long-term consequences and risks attached to its support for Russia, which can be broadly subdivided into geopolitical, economic, and normative-reputational factors.

In terms of China's **geopolitical and security objectives**, Beijing's pro-Russian stance implies that it is getting closely associated with a conflict that involves few of its own concrete strategic interests. Prior to the war, Beijing had no major stake in Ukrainian affairs, nor in NATO's potential eastward expansion toward Russia. Even as its relationship with Russia became increasingly close in recent years, Beijing consistently avoided establishing formal alliance ties with Moscow, and it had no evident wish to be dragged into Russia's active conflicts with its post-Soviet neighbors. As Moscow has now gotten bogged down in a costly war of attrition with little prospect of attaining its strategic goals in Ukraine, Beijing's noticeably pro-Russian stance following the invasion and its unwillingness to condemn Putin's actions has not only made China the target of growing suspicions in the West, but also among China's neighbors. Many states in the Indo-Pacific have already drawn a direct connection between Russia's present conduct in eastern Europe and what they anticipate to be China's future conduct in its own neighborhood, particularly with regard to its long-standing sovereignty claims over Taiwan, the South and East China Seas.

Above all, the Russia–Ukraine war and China's refusal to condemn Moscow's aggression have prompted pervasive speculation among scholars, journalists, and policymakers that China might soon emulate Russia's example and embark on a military invasion of Taiwan, particularly in light of Beijing's persistent threats and increasing military incursions against Taipei. Both the Taiwanese government and Beijing have repeatedly denied that the case of Taiwan can be compared to the situation surrounding Ukraine. Foreign Minister Wang Yi, for instance, emphasized the fundamental difference between Taiwan and Ukraine, in that the former is an "inalienable part of China", while the latter is a sovereign state (MOFAPRC 2022e, 7 March). Wang dismissed Taipei's quasi-alliance with Washington as a "dead end" based on "empty promises" of external assistance (Ibid.).

The Russia-Ukraine war does not seem to have changed Beijing's preference for a peaceful reunification with Taiwan. In August 2022, China's State Council released a white paper on 'The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era'. The document touts "peaceful reunification" as "conducive to peace and development in the Asia–Pacific and the wider world" (State Council 2022). According to US Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns, Beijing's renewed global campaign promoting the vision of "peaceful reunification" may stem from the Chinese leaders' close monitoring of the Russia-Ukraine war, including their careful (re-)examination of the option of unification by force and

the enormous risks this would entail (Martina and Bing 2022). Nonetheless, concerns about China's future conduct in light of its accommodating stance toward Russia have spurred an intensification of US-Taiwanese political and defense links. This, in turn, led Beijing to conduct unprecedentedly large naval maneuvers around Taiwan in April 2023, which were preceded by a record number of Chinese aerial incursions into Taiwanese airspace. In Taiwan itself, the Ukraine war has given added impetus to bolstering war readiness, increasing the military budget, and reforming its military reservist program (Blanchard 2022).

Such concerns have also been particularly prominent in China's relations with Japan. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Japanese government imposed an unprecedented tranche of economic sanctions against Russia and expelled several Russian diplomats. Japan's Self Defense Forces dispatched a Boeing KC-767 tanker aircraft to provide the Ukrainian military with bulletproof vests and helmets (Rich 2022). Regarding China's activities in its neighborhood, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio warned that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow" (Gould-Davies 2022). In response to the invasion, Kishida's predecessor Abe Shinzo discussed the possibility of invoking a nuclear sharing agreement with the US and suggested abandoning the policy of strategic ambiguity on whether Washington and its allies would defend Taiwan from an invasion (Taipei Times 2022).

The Ukraine war also prompted the revision of Japan's annual Diplomatic Bluebook. Published in April 2022, the Bluebook took a hard-line stance regarding Japan's territorial dispute with Russia (Akimoto 2022) and elevated concerns related to the Taiwan Strait to a "record-high" level (Lin, V 2022). The Bluebook reflected former Prime Minister Abe's sentiment that the "Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency" (Lin, V 2022) and tied Taiwan's survival to Japan's own security concerns in the region. Kishida's corresponding diplomatic activism included numerous visits to Southeast Asian and European countries and hosting the leaders of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ('Quad') with the US, India, and Australia for their summit in Tokyo in May 2022. Beyond Japan and Taiwan, Beijing's apologist stance on the Kremlin's invasion and territorial annexations in Ukraine and its close relationship with Moscow have provoked similar—albeit much more subtle and understated—concerns from other regional states as well.

In the **economic sphere**, Russia's war against Ukraine, while presenting China with various welcome opportunities for increasing preferential trade links with Moscow, has had countless negative repercussions for the global economy, which export-reliant China is particularly exposed to. At a time when China's economic growth was slowing amid volatilities in the real estate sector and recurrent mass lockdowns due to Beijing's draconian 'zero-Covid' policy, Chinese manufacturers were hit by rising global energy and commodity prices. Simultaneously, the war severed the logistics chains for some of China's Europe-bound exports (Paris 2022) and "has roiled commodities markets and disrupted supply chains, resulting in billions of dollars of losses for Chinese firms. […] War-related disruptions have also resulted in large-scale cancellations of Chinese export orders and weakened Chinese industrial productivity" (Yan 2022). Among other things, the war halted China's trade with Ukraine which, while only accounting for ca. 0.33 percent of China's total foreign trade (compared to Russia's 2.4 percent), still reached an annual volume of US$13.7

billion in 2020, with Ukraine being an especially important source of military hardware and grain, as well as an important transit country for China's Belt-and-Road-Initiative. Since 2019, China had been Ukraine's largest trading partner.

While the aforementioned economic problems caused by Moscow's belligerence appear to have been a source of irritation for the Chinese leadership, they can be considered an inevitable consequence of the war itself, rather than a consequence of Beijing's choice to provide persistent backing to Moscow. Far more importantly from a long-term economic perspective, Putin's attack on Ukraine and China's supportive stance toward Moscow have amplified calls in Western capitals to hasten economic and financial divestment from geopolitical rivals, a development that will likely affect China even more than Russia (Barkin 2022). There are indications that Beijing did not expect that the sanctions imposed on Russia would be so severe or that the West would be so united in its reaction to Putin's invasion, a development that stands in contrast to the long-standing, prominent narrative in China of ongoing Western decline (see Pei 2022). For the time being, China's continued economic development remains essentially tied to the US and its major allies. China's overall trade volume with these states remains more than ten times as large as its trade with Russia, and many Chinese industries still rely on Western markets, investments, and high-technology imports, which Russia cannot provide. But public and leadership perceptions of trade relations with China have been worsening in Western states for years (Oertel 2020), and they will likely deteriorate further, the more Beijing is perceived as an accomplice of Moscow (Rettman 2022). Consequently, Beijing could potentially incur significant long-term losses in the economic domain by jeopardizing its relations with Western states, in light of their growing concerns about China's close ties with Putin's Russia.

Lastly, Beijing's support for Moscow and its unwillingness to condemn Russia's attack and outright annexation of Ukrainian territory is also problematic insofar as it goes against the core of Beijing's own constantly proclaimed international **norms**. As China aspires to become a global leader, there has been long-standing confusion as to what kind of international order Beijing actually wishes to promote and what the normative basis of future Chinese global leadership would be. In response to such questions, China's government invariably refers to nebulous concepts, such as a 'community of common destiny' or a 'new type of great power relations', which have never been clearly defined. The only concrete normative principle that Beijing has continuously advocated in the international realm is respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states and non-interference in their internal affairs (a principle which it also invoked as part of its twelve-point peace proposal in February 2023). With some exceptions, China has been relatively consistent in applying this principle in its own foreign policy. But Beijing's implicit backing of Russia's actions in Ukraine stands in glaring contrast to its own most vocally and frequently proclaimed foreign policy maxim of safeguarding state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference, raising doubts about how much relevance this principle actually has for Chinese policy-making. Its consistent refusal to criticize or even acknowledge Russia's blatant violation of this principle in Ukraine risks undermining China's reputation and credibility with regard to the only concrete international normative principle that it has consistently advocated.

The underlying motivations for Beijing's reaction to the war: a neoclassical realist framework

As outlined above, Beijing's continued support for Moscow and its refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine in any way carries considerable risks for China in the medium to long term, and it was therefore not a self-evident policy choice. Based on this premise, the article proceeds to investigate the research question: '*Why has China opted to provide consistent (albeit discreet and often indirect) support for Russia in connection with its war against Ukraine, in spite of the negative longer-term consequences it risks incurring as a result?*' In response to this question, the article proposes the following hypothesis: '*China's overall policy response to Russia's actions in Ukraine has largely been driven by a combination of geopolitical (systemic) and domestic-level (regime security and ideological) considerations.*'

Most analysts of Sino-Russian relations have generally agreed that geopolitical motives and balance-of-power considerations have been one of the important catalysts of China's rapprochement with Russia in recent years, and many scholars have even claimed that such motives and considerations constitute *the single most important* driver of Sino-Russian alignment (see, e.g., De Wijk 2018; Kuchins 2010; Lo 2008; Lukin 2018; Lukin and Torkunov 2020; Wilson 2004; Yu and Sui 2020). While the latter claim is certainly contestable, the consistently strong anti-US stance in the official Chinese narratives about the Ukraine war and Beijing's antagonistic posture vis-à-vis some of its Indo-Pacific neighbors indicate that geopolitical and balance-of-power considerations have been one of the primary factors shaping the Chinese perception of, and policy response to, the Ukraine conflict. This suggests that a theoretical framework derived from Realism can be particularly suitable for this analysis.

In geopolitical terms, Beijing's stance on Russia's actions in Ukraine is primarily a function of its relations with China's greatest systemic rival, the US (and its Western allies). From this perspective, the inexorable growth of Chinese power in recent decades has unavoidably led to growing structural tensions with the global system's established hegemon. Since China is the only state with a potential to rival the US, a future confrontation between both quasi-superpowers is becoming increasingly likely. While Beijing has tried to avoid (or at least not to hasten) an open confrontation with the US, many Chinese officials appear to regard an eventual clash with Washington as inevitable. For this purpose, they want to ensure that Russia would be on board in such a conflict, since it is the only other great power that can be relied upon to side with Beijing against Washington, were a conflict to arise. Consequently, China and Russia have long anchored their cooperation on the principle of restoring 'multipolarity' in the global system.

That said, it remains doubtful whether a *purely* systemic, geopolitical explanation is sufficient to account for the full extent of Beijing's commitment to Moscow (cf. Yoder 2020: 888–889). In spite of growing Sino-US tensions, Beijing has continued its enormous trade and investment cooperation with the US, which it considers far more valuable than its economic links with Russia. It has remained

averse to the idea of upgrading and transforming its relations with Moscow into a formal alliance. Until recently, Beijing also remained relatively indifferent about the process of NATO expansion in eastern Europe, while Russia sustained close security ties with some of China's primary regional rivals, particularly India and Vietnam, which contributed to Moscow's reluctance to support Beijing's policies in the South China Sea (Dikarev and Lukin 2022). Moreover, China's government has done relatively little in recent years to court other potential great power allies in its systemic struggle with the US, such as India, with whom it remains locked in a long-standing border dispute over sparsely inhabited mountain territories of little strategic value. Meanwhile, from the perspective of Russia, as a former superpower trying to reassert its international status, China's rise and the growing bilateral power imbalance have also raised certain suspicions and concerns, which the amicable personal relationship between Presidents Xi and Putin likely helped to mitigate (cf. Larson 2020).

The article therefore posits that, in order to understand Beijing's motives more comprehensively, it is necessary to *not only* focus on geopolitical, systemic factors linked to the global balance of power, but also on certain domestic-level factors, specifically the concrete interests and beliefs of China's top leadership surrounding Xi Jinping. It assumes that, besides being informed by geopolitical calculations of global power relations and the structural pressures they exert on China, Xi and his closest associates are also driven by personal convictions and concrete, subjective concerns, such as securing the long-term survival and domestic legitimacy of their regime. The importance of regime security considerations as one of the drivers of China's relations with Russia has been analyzed by a number of scholars in recent years (see, e.g., Owen 2020; Krickovic 2016).

Acknowledging the importance of taking both systemic and domestic variables into account, the article draws on a Neoclassical Realist theoretical approach. Neoclassical Realism accepts the Neorealist premise that the international (system-level) distribution of power and the balancing pressure it exerts represents the primary independent variable determining state behavior, but it also posits that certain domestic (unit-level) factors have to be added as intervening variables to complete the causal explanation (Rose 1998). The question *which* specific domestic variable is chosen as the intervening variable is at the discretion of the analyst. There have been some attempts in recent years to analyze China-Russia cooperation by drawing on Neoclassical Realism. The unit-level intervening variables identified in these studies included historical memories, territorial concerns, divergent economic models, or regional economic interests (Korolev and Portyakov 2019; Korolev and Portyakov 2018). The basic assumption in these studies was that system-level geopolitical factors by themselves provide strong incentives for Beijing and Moscow to seek mutual alignment, while the domestic-level factors are regarded as hindrances that obstruct the process of deepening bilateral cooperation. In contrast, this article proposes that there are certain domestic/unit-level factors (particularly those tied to the specific interests and convictions of the top-level political leadership) which, rather than posing obstacles for China cooperating closely with Russia, are providing *additional impetus* for doing so.

For the purposes of this article, the relevant domestic/unit-level intervening variable will be defined as: 'The concrete interests and personal convictions of China's top leadership (Xi Jinping and his closest associates), specifically Xi's prioritization of securing the long-term survival and domestic legitimacy of his regime.' By highlighting the specific interests and views of China's leaders, the article follows an approach that was laid out by some of the earliest theorists of Neoclassical Realism and outlined in Gideon Rose's seminal 1998 article that defined the theory and coined the term 'Neoclassical Realism'. According to Rose, "Foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, and so it is their perceptions of relative power that matter, not simply relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being" (Rose 1998: 147). Thus, "To understand the way states interpret and respond to their external environment, [Neoclassical Realists] say, one must analyze how systemic pressures are translated through unit level intervening variables such as decision-makers' perceptions and domestic state structure. In the neoclassical realist world leaders can be constrained by both international and domestic politics" (Rose 1998: 152).

The independent variable: geopolitics and systemic power relations

The fact that Beijing has pursued broadly pro-Russian policies since February 2022, regardless of the attendant risks and costs, appears to be in large part due to geopolitical calculations of systemic power relations—the independent variable determining states' foreign policy according to Neoclassical Realism—and the resulting centrality and importance for Beijing of preserving its long-cultivated relationship with Moscow, China's sole great power partner. The past decade has seen a notable deterioration of Beijing's relations with Washington and with most US allies, across practically all policy dimensions. Simultaneously, the Sino-Russian 'axis' has grown unprecedentedly strong, with both Beijing and Moscow wishing to cultivate the relationship as a counterweight to perceived US hegemony and as the foundation for a more 'multipolar' world order reflective of their broader geostrategic interests. In light of this, China's leadership has vocally reaffirmed the importance of the Sino-Russian partnership on many occasions since the start of the war. By contrast, Beijing has few incentives for siding with the West against Russia. As prominent Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong observed, Beijing does not believe "that seeking common ground with Washington on the war in Ukraine will meaningfully improve broader Sino-U.S. relations" and "even if Beijing were to join in the international condemnation of Russia, the United States would not soften its containment policy against China" (Yan 2022).

From Beijing's perspective, the war in Ukraine has implications not only for China's relations with Moscow and the West, but also, in particular, for China's role in the wider Indo-Pacific region. In principle, some of the consequences of Russia's belligerence in eastern Europe *could* have had advantageous ramifications for China's strategic posture in East Asia. While the Biden administration had originally pledged to focus its foreign policy resources on countering China, the conflict in Ukraine has created a protracted distraction, tying US resources to Russia and

Europe and directing Washington's attention away from the Indo-Pacific. In addition, if Russia had succeeded in swiftly conquering Ukraine, it could have sent a forceful message to the West about respecting the spheres of influence of rival great powers (particularly those with sizable nuclear arsenals) in an increasingly multipolar world. Instead, however, the war in Ukraine has primarily led to a reinvigoration of the US-led alliance and to a massive attrition of Russia's military power, at relatively little cost to Washington and its allies.

The Chinese government's eagerness to amplify Russia's narrative that the root cause of the Ukraine conflict was NATO enlargement seems to derive from its own concerns about US-led alliance-building in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the form of the revived 'Quad' with India, Japan, and Australia and the AUKUS security pact with Australia and the United Kingdom (McCarthy 2022). Since the introduction of the US's Indo-Pacific concept, China's foreign policy elites have been extremely wary of Washington's motives. Against the backdrop of the expansion of Beijing's Belt-and-Road-Initiative and China's growing geopolitical influence, the Indo-Pacific concept has been interpreted by Chinese IR-scholars as an attempt to contain China's economic and security clout in the region (Su 2017; Wei and Zhang 2021) and consolidate American hegemony (Zeng and Zhang 2021). Disdain for Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy has long been combined with a "projected confidence" (Wuthnow 2019: 103) in Beijing's own capability to overcome this latest round of US containment. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi repeatedly dismissed the Indo-Pacific strategy as a "headline-grabbing idea" that "will find no market" (cited by Wuthnow 2019: 103) and derided Washington's meagre financial contribution to new economic programs in Asia (Yong 2018).

The outbreak of the Ukraine war has been a reality check for the Chinese government's projected confidence to be able to counter Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. Russia's struggles in Ukraine, combined with the solidarity manifested among the states in the US alliance system, appear to have ruffled China's foreign policy elites and elicited calls to create a new regional security framework (MOFAPRC 2022k, 25 April), so as to avoid another "Ukraine crisis" in Asia. Among China's policymakers, the events in Ukraine have bolstered claims that Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy amounts to an attempt to create an 'Asian NATO', combined with a sense of urgency for China to react. While condemning the new security initiatives under the umbrella of the Indo-Pacific strategy—including AUKUS, which they have labelled an "Anglo-Saxon clique" that is liable to "increase nuclear proliferation risks […] and undermines peace and development in the Asia–Pacific" (MOFAPRC 2022h, 6 April)—Chinese officials have instead expressed a strong preference for promoting existing regional multilateral frameworks, such as ASEAN. Wang Yi has modified his previously dismissive tone on the US-led Indo-Pacific initiative to a more strongly-worded appeal to boycott and oppose it. The real intention of the Indo-Pacific strategy, according to Wang in his press releases following the outbreak of the Ukraine war, is to create an Indo-Pacific version of NATO to challenge the ASEAN-centered regional cooperation framework (MOFAPRC 2022k, 25 April). During a telephone conversation with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bùi Thanh Sơn in April 2022, Wang stated that "the Ukraine issue" had made Asian countries realize that:

> The United States tries to create regional tension and incite antagonism and confrontation by pushing ahead with the 'Indo-Pacific Strategy'. Such moves will seriously damage the hard-won peace and development in the region and seriously erode the ASEAN-centered regional cooperation architecture. We can't let the Cold War mentality resurge in the region and the tragedy of Ukraine be repeated around us. (MOFAPRC 2022j, 14 April)

Former Deputy Foreign Minister Le Yucheng similarly expressed an apparent growing concern among Chinese officials in the wake of the Ukraine war about the military and security implications of the US's Indo-Pacific strategy, claiming that the war "provides a mirror" to "reflect on the Asia–Pacific situation" (MOFAPRC 2022g, 19 March), and the US's Indo-Pacific strategy is "as dangerous as the NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe" and will "lead to disastrous consequences" (MOFAPRC 2022l, 6 May). The fact that NATO's new Strategic Concept, agreed at the alliance's June 2022 summit in Madrid, mentioned China for the first time ever, describing it as posing "serious challenges" to global stability (Ni 2022), has only heightened the sense in Beijing that NATO is no longer just 'Russia's problem', but also increasingly China's.

In light of the marked growth of Sino-US geostrategic tensions, Beijing wants to ensure that Moscow would be on board in any future confrontation with Washington, since it is the only other great power that can be relied upon to support China in such a scenario. Beijing's fixation on its geopolitical competition with the US and its allies has been reflected in the fact that, while it has been circumspect in limiting some of the most public and conspicuous aspects of its interaction with Moscow, Sino-Russian cooperation in the *military* sphere, particularly in the form of joint maneuvers and patrols, has in fact been further *intensified* since February 2022. China has continued its joint military exercises with Russia and deployed a sizeable contingent of troops to participate in Russia's large-scale quadrennial military drill 'Vostok 2022' in early September, which for the first time included simulating Sino-Russian joint naval strikes against aircraft carrier groups. It was also the first time the People's Liberation Army (PLA) sent all three branches of its armed forces to participate in a single exercise in a foreign country. When Japan, Washington's foremost East Asian ally, emerged as a particularly vocal critic of Russia's invasion and its potential implications for Chinese expansionism in East Asia, Beijing and Moscow responded with a multitude of joint naval exercises and joint aerial patrols in the Sea of Japan, East China Sea, and the Western Pacific (Ministry of Defense 2022). This included one instance in July 2022 when Chinese and Russian frigates jointly entered the contiguous waters around the Japanese-held Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, their first joint naval operation in these waters since 2016 (prompting Tokyo to issue a protest), as well as instances when their aircraft jointly entered South Korea's Air Defense Identification Zone.

During a four-day official visit to Moscow in April 2023, China's Defense Minister General Li Shangfu stated that "The armed forces of China and Russia will implement the agreements reached by the heads of state and expand military cooperation, military-technical ties and arms trade," adding that "We will certainly take them to a new level" (Isachenkov 2023). Chinese military representatives have also

reportedly been in close coordination with Moscow to study the Russian armed forces' experiences in facing US- and European-made weapon systems on the battlefields of Ukraine, since the war provides useful lessons for the CCP leadership about how Washington and its allies are likely to (re)act in future confrontations with China. The Chinese military has traditionally been using similar equipment, strategy, and doctrine as Russia's armed forces, although it has undergone substantial modernization processes in recent years. China's military leadership has therefore been closely observing the confrontation between Russian and Western-equipped armed forces (Mastro and Scissors 2022), treating it as a valuable lesson for an eventual standoff with the US and its allies over Taiwan, which many in China's leadership seem to regard as inevitable.

Beijing's expansion of its ties with Russia in various sectors of bilateral *economic* exchange also reflects the Chinese government's geopolitical objectives and priorities and its systemic rivalry with the US. As outlined earlier, the development of China's economic interaction with Russia since February 2022 has been ambivalent, with substantial increases in some sectors of bilateral trade and cautious restraint in others. In those sectors where there has been an increase in trade, it has generally been driven by commercial and profit motives, particularly by sub-state corporate actors in China. But beyond profit motives and economic opportunism, China's substantial increase of Russian energy and raw materials imports at heavily reduced prices (as well as its provision of high-end industrial goods that are becoming increasingly scarce in Russia) also has a strategic dimension that fits within China's broader geopolitical calculus:

For one, it generates a secure and cost-effective supply of various strategic resources and commodities to China which can be conveniently imported across a secure land border, providing Beijing with more leverage in future negotiations with other foreign suppliers. Russia has these resources and commodities in abundance, and they can contribute to driving future Chinese growth, even as global trade links and supply lines are becoming more problematic amid increasing tensions with the US. For China's leaders, one of the primary lessons of observing Russia's struggles against Western sanctions appears to be the validation and reinforcement of long-standing plans to strengthen China's economic resilience and self-sufficiency and to sanctions-proof the Chinese economy in anticipation of a future confrontation with Washington and its allies. Chinese policymakers have emphasized the importance of economic security, including food self-sufficiency and self-reliance in high technology, as well as reducing China's reliance on US dollars in international trade and finance.

Secondly, increased trade with Russia helps establishing China's currency and financial institutions as indispensable conduits of global economic and financial interaction, providing Beijing with valuable leverage in any future dispute with the US. From Beijing's perspective, one particularly positive geo-economic consequence of the financial turmoil caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the rising international profile of China's currency, the renminbi (RMB). Under severe sanctions pressure and largely cut off from international monetary reserves, Moscow is converting large portions of its foreign exchange reserves into RMB and has also tried to issue RMB-denominated government bonds to attract Chinese investors,

although both of these policies have been complicated by Beijing's exceptionally strict capital controls. Since Russia lacks alternative options, the RMB has gained prominence as a regional trading currency in northern Eurasia without even being fully convertible, rapidly replacing US dollars and euros in Sino-Russian energy and commodities trade and interbank financial transfers. In August 2022, for the first time ever, the volume of daily trading in RMB at the Moscow Exchange exceeded trading in US dollars. Russia became the third-largest market outside Mainland China for payments made in RMB, whereas by February 2022 it had not even been on the list of the world's top-15 RMB markets (Wei and Walker 2022). This could also have enduring consequences for RMB use beyond the confines of Sino-Russian bilateral trade. In late June 2022, India's biggest cement producer, UltraTech Cement, imported a large cargo of Russian coal and reportedly paid using RMB—possibly the first time a major Indian company has done this for international trade, and likely a portent of what will become a more frequent occurrence in the future (Varadhan et al. 2022).

Finally, by providing some trade outlets for Russia's beleaguered economy, China can pursue the strategic objective of propping up and stabilizing its long-time geopolitical partner Russia. What's more, in light of Moscow's unprecedented economic isolation from its erstwhile European trade partners, its continued economic engagement with China is gradually turning into a relationship of direct dependence—raising the question whether Russia is steering toward a client relationship with Beijing that is more akin to Moscow's own ties with Alexander Lukashenko's Belarus. An assessment report that was drafted in the summer of 2022 by officials at Russia's Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media, which was reportedly shared with members of Russia's National Security Council and the General Staff of the Armed Forces, expressed concern that Chinese electronics companies like Huawei could come to dominate the Russian market in sectors such as chips and network devices, which might lead to "a scenario of total dependence" and pose a risk to Russia's information security and networks (Nardelli 2023).

Notwithstanding Moscow's apparent concerns about increasing economic dependence on China, for Beijing this development is highly expedient, since it promises to turn a fellow great power into a quasi-client state that will henceforth reliably toe the Chinese line on geostrategic questions of particular importance to Beijing. The Kremlin's increasing willingness to unambiguously support Beijing's position on Taiwan and other Chinese territorial claims was already observable in 2022. Vladimir Dzhabarov, the Deputy Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in Russia's Federation Council, stated in August that Moscow would be ready to provide military assistance to China in the event of an armed conflict over Taiwan (TASS 2022). In the future, as Moscow's dependence on China is rapidly deepening, the Kremlin will likely feel increasingly compelled to submit itself to Beijing's strategic wishes, even if that implies downgrading Russia's relations with other Indo-Pacific countries, such as India or Vietnam, as well as providing "access to the most sophisticated Russian weapons and their designs, preferential access to the Russian Arctic, the accommodation of Chinese security interests in Central Asia, and Russia's support […] for China's positions in all regional and global issues, most notably in territorial disputes between China and its neighbors" (Gabuev 2022).

The intervening variable: leadership and elite interests

Much of China's persistent (albeit understated) support for Russia has been attributable to Beijing's fixation on geopolitics and the systemic competition with the US. However, considering the substantial costs that China risks incurring by siding with Russia (which were outlined in an earlier section), it is doubtful that system-level, geopolitical pressures linked to the global balance of power are by themselves sufficient to account for the extent of Beijing's commitment to Moscow. There certainly is no guarantee that systemic interests alone would have been enough to offset these manifold risks and costs, not least since, from a geopolitical perspective, Russia's attempt to strategically reassert itself by invading Ukraine appears to have largely backfired, raising weighty questions about the utility of Beijing's continuous support for Moscow. Russia's military might and materiel has been (and continues to be) significantly eroded in an extended war of attrition, whereas the US and its allies have so far committed relatively limited resources to the conflict (usually to the tune of ca. 0.3% or less of their GDP). The invasion appears to have consolidated the West and considerably strengthened the US alliance network, and while the conflict in Europe has proved a distraction for Washington, the Biden administration has made it a point to not shift much of its attention (or its strategic resources) away from China and the Indo-Pacific. As previously outlined when addressing the costs of Beijing's support for Moscow, concerns and suspicions about China's aims in the Indo-Pacific – among its neighbors and its strategic adversaries – have only risen in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine, and much of this could arguably have been avoided if Beijing had sought to clearly condemn and distance itself from Moscow early in the conflict.

In keeping with a Neoclassical Realist framework, it is therefore important to also consider certain additional, *domestic-level* dynamics within Chinese policy-making circles—namely the concrete interests and personal convictions of China's top leadership (Xi Jinping and his closest associates), specifically Xi's prioritization of securing the survival and domestic legitimacy of his regime—which act as the unit-level intervening variable through which systemic pressures are filtered. China's political system, while notoriously inscrutable, has never been entirely monolithic. The importance of considering domestic-level, intra-regime dynamics is manifested in the fact that, throughout much of 2022, the Ukraine war exposed visible disagreements within the usually tight-knit Chinese leadership and an apparent lack of consensus about the development of China's strategic ties with Russia. A conspicuous manifestation of intra-regime discordances was the transfer and apparent demotion of a Xi confidant, Deputy Foreign Minister Le Yucheng, in June 2022. An important diplomatic figure in China's handling of the Ukraine crisis, Le is a career diplomat and a Russia expert who was commonly regarded as part of Xi's faction and a long-time advocate of a pro-Kremlin foreign policy (Chen 2022). He was seen as China's third-most-influential diplomat (Lin, Y 2022), with potential to be appointed as the next foreign minister (Ma 2022). When Putin visited Xi in Beijing in early February 2022, Le held a press

conference where he described Sino-Russian relations as a "no limits friendship" (MOFAPRC 2022a, 5 February), thus bringing this phrase to global prominence. This description reportedly did not resonate with many of his colleagues in the diplomatic establishment, such as veteran diplomat and Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Yang Jiechi (Wang 2022).

Once Putin had embarked on his invasion of Ukraine, Le's concept of a 'no limits' friendship stoked additional speculation in the West about the extent of Beijing's support for Russia. Dissatisfied with Le's performance, then-Premier Li Keqiang and moderate diplomats reportedly endeavored to transfer Le out of the foreign ministry. Despite having actively endorsed President Xi's pro-Russia agenda, Le was removed from the foreign policy system and appointed as deputy director of the National Radio and Television Administration on 14 June 2022—a transfer widely interpreted as a de facto demotion and the end of Le's political career (Bloomberg 2022a). Foreign analysts described Le's removal from the foreign ministry as the "first political casualty" in China stemming from the war in Ukraine (Adlakha 2022). Intra-regime dynamics appeared to be placing certain constraints on Xi's 'no limits' friendship with Putin's Russia, and the pro-Russian orientation of cadres like Le Yucheng was being balanced by those within the political elite who were more interested in prioritizing the recovery of China's domestic economy and restoring the importance of the US and EU on the foreign policy agenda (Nakazawa 2022).

Concerns in Chinese policy circles about sticking too closely with Moscow were apparently magnified by the Russian military's unexpectedly poor performance on the battlefield in Ukraine, which was evident since the early weeks of the war. According to US intelligence officials, China's leaders appeared to be unsettled by Russia's military difficulties (Brunnstrom and Martina 2022), having initially expected Moscow to achieve its strategic aims through a swift military victory that would have strengthened Russia, divided Europe, and kept Washington distracted, without substantially damaging China's own interests in Ukraine and the wider region. In April 2022, Gao Yusheng, the former Chinese ambassador to Ukraine, argued that Putin had already lost the war, due to his failure to achieve swift success on the battlefield and the astronomical economic cost of financing his hopeless empire project (Gao 2022). Putin's serious strategic blunders regarding Ukraine and the Russian armed forces' surprisingly poor performance raised the question for Beijing of how much of a strategic asset Russia could still be for China in the future (Hu 2022). As Russia's battlefield reversals in Ukraine grew more serious in early September 2022, around the time of Xi's first personal meeting with Putin since the war began, and as Putin chose to escalate the conflict in subsequent weeks by ordering a large-scale troop mobilization in Russia and issuing renewed nuclear threats against Ukraine's Western supporters, Beijing initially appeared to subtly dial down its support for Russia. When Xi met Putin in September, there was no more talk of a 'no limits' friendship and Putin himself publicly acknowledged that Beijing had "questions and concerns" about his war in Ukraine. According to prominent Chinese scholar Shi Yinhong, "China has no other choice except (to) stay away somewhat further from Putin because of his war escalation, his aggression and annexation, and his renewed threat of nuclear war" (Gan 2022).

The fact that Beijing has ultimately pursued a policy of closely sticking with Russia regardless, even as this apparently did not reflect a consensus view within Chinese government circles, appears to have been largely due to the unrivalled personal influence of Xi Jinping. According to public assessments by US intelligence officials, China's commitment to assist Moscow in dealing with the fallout from its invasion of Ukraine has been driven from the top, by President Xi, over the objections of less senior officials in the government apparatus (Borger 2022b). Besides geopolitical calculations, Xi's seemingly unwavering support for Putin has also been reflective of domestic developments and heightened intra-regime tussles at a sensitive time for the CCP elites, amid widespread disquiet about Xi's controversial strategy to rigorously contain the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in China and, more importantly, in the run-up to, and the aftermath of, the 20th Communist Party congress in October 2022. The congress was set to cement Xi's personal rule over China for the foreseeable future, essentially altering some of the fundamental principles of how China has been governed since the 1990s. During Xi's presidency, the limited degree of intra-party institutionalization and party-state separation attained decades earlier under Deng Xiaoping has effectively been replaced by a highly personalist style of governance that concentrates power in the hands of a single leader, which led to an increase in intra-party divisions and discontent.

2022 was therefore a critical year for Xi's domestic consolidation of power, and amidst the intra-CCP power struggles Putin has been a known quantity for China's leader and a long-standing guarantor of bilateral stability. Notwithstanding some evident intra-elite backlash against his choices regarding Russia, Xi ultimately prevailed in the domestic power struggle, and in October the Party congress confirmed his undisputed personal leadership for the foreseeable future. In December, Xi reportedly "instructed his government to forge stronger economic ties with Russia," by way of "increasing Chinese imports of Russian oil, gas and farm goods, more joint energy partnerships in the Arctic and increased Chinese investment in Russian infrastructure, such as railways and ports", even as he "sought to temper relations with Russia publicly to avoid provoking a collective Western backlash" (Wei and Walker 2022). After formally being appointed to a third term as China's president in March 2023, Xi chose Russia as the destination of his first state visit, and during his three-day stay in Moscow he reaffirmed his personal commitment to a close Sino-Russian partnership which "is consistent with historical logic and a strategic choice of China. It will not be changed by any turn of events" (MOFAPRC 2023, 22 March).

In their foreign policy approach, besides being guided by geopolitical calculations of global power relations and structural pressures, Xi and his closest associates in China's top leadership have also been driven by personal convictions and their own concrete interests. Various analysts, including some who have interacted with Xi in person, have claimed that he has a highly ideological mindset and worldview, which renders him convinced about the superiority of the Chinese system, the certainty of Western decline, and the inevitability of confrontation between Beijing and Washington (see, e.g., Rudd 2022). Following the Party congress in October 2022, Xi was able to place his loyalists, most of whom appear to share his own hard-line ideological views, in practically all important positions of government.

The concrete interests driving Xi and his closest associates are primarily linked to their prioritization of the continued survival and domestic legitimacy of the CCP regime. Throughout Xi's presidency, concerns about the stability and legitimacy of the CCP's leadership have consistently been among his foremost policy priorities. Already shortly after he became CCP General Secretary, Xi started a campaign compelling Party officials to diligently study the lessons of the breakdown of the Soviet Union and its Communist Party—a subject which, under his leadership, has been incessantly analyzed in China (Huang 2013)—whilst simultaneously devoting great attention to the Tiananmen protest in 1989 (Tiffert 2019). In August 2013, Xi addressed a gathering of top CCP leaders and firmly warned against "Hostile forces" which try "to compete with us for strategic positions, for the people's hearts and for the masses, and ultimately to overthrow the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and China's socialist system. If we allow this discourse to become popular […], it is bound to muddle the party spirit and popular sentiments, and to endanger the party's leadership and the security of the socialist state regime." He further warned that "The disintegration of a regime often starts from the ideological sphere, political unrest and regime change may happen overnight" (Xi 2018).

In light of his acute concerns about regime security, Xi's government has massively expanded the concrete mechanisms of suppressing civil society activism, including internet restrictions and online censorship, as well as big-data-assisted surveillance and public control instruments. By most estimates, since Xi came to power state spending on domestic security has greatly outstripped spending on external defense (Lam 2019). Many analysts of Chinese foreign policy, including the authors of a 2020 study by the RAND Corporation, have concluded that, in terms of the hierarchy of their security priorities, "Chinese leaders are the most worried about domestic instability. In their eyes, national security begins at home, and regime security is synonymous with national security" (Scobell et al. 2020: 27), to the extent that "These internal security responsibilities tend to serve as a domestic drag on China's national defense efforts, diverting funds, resources, and attention away from addressing external security challenges" (Scobell et al. 2020: 28). Wang Jisi, a leading Chinese academic, wrote in 2014 that the main concern of Xi's government in dealing with Washington is not geopolitics, but "alleged US schemes to subvert the Chinese government and to penetrate politically and ideologically into Chinese society" (cited in Rachman 2015).

For Xi, one of the greatest perceived security concerns has been the wave of anti-authoritarian 'color revolutions' sweeping former Soviet and Middle Eastern countries. Xi has consistently claimed that these pro-democratic regime changes have been directly instigated and stage-managed by Western governments. According to former senior US officials, during inter-governmental meetings in the early 2010s, Xi frequently "hinted he worried about the Chinese Communist Party's grip", and "Speaking privately with President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden, Mr. Xi suggested that China was a target of 'color revolutions'" (Buckley and Myers 2022). Ryan Hass, the US National Security Council director for China from 2013 to 2017, recalled that when Xi visited Washington, "He would talk all the time about color revolutions. That's clearly a sort of front-of-mind issue for him" (Ibid.). In a December 2015 speech, Xi claimed that: "At present, various hostile forces have

been trying to fabricate a 'color revolution' in our country, in an attempt to topple the Chinese Communist Party's leadership and our country's socialist system. This is a real danger to the security of our regime" (Xi 2018).

One of the propellants of Sino-Russian rapprochement and the burgeoning Xi-Putin relationship in recent years has been the gradual convergence of the regime types and mechanics of governance in China and Russia. For years, both leaders have consistently expressed their shared apprehension about anti-authoritarian 'color revolutions', not least due to concerns for domestic regime security, and this has likely also influenced their respective outlooks on the events in Ukraine. Already in 2014, when Russia's military first intervened in Ukraine, annexing Crimea and instigating conflict in the country's east, Xi had opted to provide consistent (albeit implicit) support for Moscow. This decision was at least partially rooted in the two regimes' shared aversion to the 'Euromaidan' protests and the subsequent ouster of the semi-authoritarian Yanukovych government in Kyiv (Düben 2015). Beijing and Moscow regarded the ouster as merely the latest iteration of the wave of 'color revolutions' that might lead to repercussions or even emulation at home—not least since Ukraine had already been the site of another pro-democratic (and pro-Western) 'color revolution', the 'Orange Revolution', a decade earlier. It is therefore likely that Xi has been observing the political events in Ukraine through a similar lens as Putin's Russia and has been sympathetic toward Moscow's interpretation of its conflict with Kyiv. In light of Xi's close personal relationship with Putin and their similar leadership style, Xi (who once told Russia's president: "I have a similar personality to yours" [Wei and Walker 2022]) also likely concluded that a failure by Putin in Ukraine would not only amount to a strategic victory for Beijing's primary international rival, the US, but might reflect negatively on him personally as well, which would have been particularly inopportune during the sensitive months prior to the 20th Party congress.

Throughout recent years, Xi and Putin have increasingly cooperated in helping each other reinforce domestic regime stability and legitimacy and minimizing domestic threats to their respective regimes. Moscow and Beijing have backed each other diplomatically whenever their domestic political practices attract foreign condemnation, jointly deflecting third-party criticism about contentious domestic issues, such as Hong Kong, Xinjiang, or Russia's suppression of opposition protests. Both regimes have provided each other with outspoken diplomatic and rhetorical support in their campaigns against domestic opposition groups and anti-government demonstrations, and they have actively copied and amplified each other's official narratives about these events through cooperation between their state-controlled media networks. Their interaction with each other has invariably been characterized by mutual praise and reassurance. Beyond rhetorical support, Xi and Putin have increasingly provided each other with material assistance in the suppression of pro-democratic protests, dissidents, and any form of domestic political opposition, including collaboration and exchanges between their internal security and domestic intelligence services. They have also closely cooperated in devising strategies and technologies for public surveillance and internet censorship.

At bilateral meetings, Xi and Putin have increasingly put the suppression of domestic political threats at the top of their agenda, linking any form of public

protest and activism critical of their governments to illicit foreign interference and subversion. The most obvious manifestation of such mutual support has been their joint opposition to pro-democratic 'color revolutions', which has become one of the most frequent talking points at Sino-Russian top-level meetings. As such, it has been prominently reaffirmed in most key speeches and agreements, including the joint statement at the Xi-Putin summit meeting on 4 February 2022, shortly before Russia's invasion of Ukraine (President of Russia 2022). When Xi next met Putin in person at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Uzbekistan in September 2022, he once again warned that the partners must "prevent external forces from instigating a colour revolution" (ABC 2022), and the Sino-Russian joint statement published at Xi's and Putin's subsequent summit meeting in Moscow in March 2023 likewise announced that both sides had once again agreed to strengthen cooperation in preventing 'color revolutions' (State Council of China 2023).

Conclusion and assessment

China is a central actor in the global crisis that arose out of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Notwithstanding persistent claims of neutrality, Beijing has wholeheartedly adopted and amplified Russia's narrative about the causes and conduct of the war and has consistently furnished Moscow with political and diplomatic support. China also considerably expanded its trade links with Russia, providing Moscow with an indispensable export outlet and supplying it with otherwise hard-to-obtain technological products, including dual-use goods, but remaining cautious not to conspicuously breach Western sanctions (particularly in the financial sphere). Beijing has refrained from fully and unreservedly committing itself to supporting Moscow amid the Kremlin's war against Ukraine, but across most sectors of bilateral cooperation it has opted for continued (or even increased) engagement and has provided consistent (albeit discreet and often indirect) backing for Russia.

Why did Beijing choose to stick so closely with Moscow, in spite of the considerable disadvantages and risks this entails for China, in terms of complicating economic relations with its most lucrative trade partners, exacerbating suspicions (and accelerating alliance-building) among its Indo-Pacific neighbors, and undermining its own long-cultivated legal-normative principles (and hence its credibility as a future guarantor of global order)? The extreme opacity of China's political system means that answering this question conclusively is challenging, but the article finds that, in large part, the answer lies in a combination of geopolitical (systemic) and domestic-level (regime security and ideological) considerations.

There is much evidence that geopolitical calculations of global power relations and the systemic pressures they exert on China—the independent variable in the Neoclassical Realist framework—have indeed played a highly significant role in motivating Beijing to continue providing qualified support for Putin's Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, notwithstanding the attendant costs and risks. As an emerging superpower, China's geopolitical tensions and rivalry with the US and its allies have consistently grown, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, and so have the ensuing systemic pressures, providing Beijing with an important incentive for

continuously supporting Moscow. Even China's *economic* interaction with Russia since the start of the invasion can in large part be rationalized within this geopolitical calculus, in terms of securing the flow of strategic resources, preserving Russia as a de facto client state of China, and extending the strategic purview of Chinese financial instruments and institutions—all without Beijing having to make any particularly substantial commitments to Moscow.

However, on the basis of the independent variable *alone*, the cost–benefit calculation—of whether Russia's value as a partner in future geopolitical contests with the US can outweigh the manifold costs and risks China is bound to incur—might have remained inconclusive. Instead, there is evidence that Beijing's consistently pro-Russian policy course was not just conditioned by geopolitical objectives and systemic pressures. Rather, geopolitical objectives have been reinforced by the specific interests and convictions of China's leader and his closest associates (especially interests related to authoritarian regime security), which have acted as a unit-level intervening variable. Thus, systemic pressures have been modulated by Xi Jinping's personal and ideological affinity for Putin and especially the two leaders' strongly intersecting interests regarding the preservation of their personal power and the security of their regimes, which is epitomized in their years-long joint struggle and agitation against 'color revolutions'. The outcome has been a more consistently pro-Russian policy course than geopolitical factors alone might have prompted. From the perspective of China's leader, geopolitical/systemic security objectives and domestic regime security objectives appear to have converged as two independently important foreign policy objectives. But beyond that, to some degree they also appear to have *merged*, in that conceptions of geopolitical balancing and conceptions of authoritarian self-preservation have combined (in conjunction with deep-seated ideological beliefs) to form a single, integrated threat perception in the mind of China's leader and those closest to him. From this perspective, the US appears as China's natural adversary, whereas Moscow appears as the most logical great power partner (its blunders in Ukraine notwithstanding). In other words, Xi and his closest associates have more than just geopolitical reasons to continue sticking close to Putin, and these additional domestic-level reasons have served to further strengthen the already very strong geopolitical impetus for assisting Russia—albeit not unconditionally, and not without trying to preserve the pretense that China is a neutral party in the Kremlin's war against Ukraine.

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NB: For the purposes of this reference list, 'Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China' has been abbreviated to 'MOFAPRC'

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