

Chapter 2

The Russo-Ukrainian War and its Impact on the Rivalry of Major Powers

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The Russian-Ukraine war has changed the fundamentals of what we know about the world order. Although this war has been the first European war on the ground initiated by a nuclear power since the end of WWII, regrettably its impact is truly global, reshaping international geopolitics in a profound manner.¹ This paper is an initial assessment of Beijing's response to the war, focusing on its interaction with key parties involved in the war, especially in relation to Russia and the United States. Clearly, the post-Cold War strategic triangular relations between Beijing, Moscow, and Washington have undergone substantial alteration because of the war. The main theme of this piece of research is to address questions such as how these triangular relations will change, which direction the change will take, and what consequences the change will bring about to a new Cold War order in the world after the Ukraine war.

Beijing's Reaction to the Ukraine War

Whether the eruption of the Ukraine war caught Beijing by surprise remains an unanswered question. Given the long-brewing period with talk of invasion and President Xi Jinping's decision-making style based on bottom-line thinking, Beijing should have had contingency plans. On the other hand, most Chinese strategists dismissed the possibility of a Russian invasion of Ukraine when Washington started to warn about an imminent Russian military attack against Ukraine in late January 2022. China's official media repeatedly mocked the US warning of war as an example of information warfare, especially when the Russian army did not enter Ukraine on the date Washington initially alleged would be the start of invasion. This position reflected a psychological preference for no war of the Chinese leadership and population.² Therefore, the invasion was a disappointment for Beijing, as it worsened unpredictability of world geopolitical

¹ Mykola Kapitonenko, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine has Changed the World," *National Interests*, March 4, 2022.

² Many ordinary Chinese made a substantial loss in the stock market right after the invasion.

strife deeply involving China. Logically, China was not on President Putin's side on this particular issue.

Beijing in a Catch-22 Dilemma

Immediately after the war broke out on February 24, 2022, one global talking point was whether Moscow notified Beijing in advance about its plan of invasion.³ The western media widely circulated that Putin revealed the plan to Xi when they held a summit meeting on the occasion of Beijing's Winter Olympic Games in January. This allegation was officially dismissed by Qin Gang, China's ambassador to the United States.⁴ It is simply common sense that the happy occasion of the Olympic Games was not ideal for talk of war. If Putin did notify Xi during the meeting, he would have breached a valued diplomatic protocol. Yet constructing a cardinal environment through a Xi-Putin summit would be conducive for Russian invasion even if Putin did not solicit any specific Chinese support.⁵

Here, it is interesting to analyze the hidden message behind the western media's speculation that Beijing knew about the Ukraine war beforehand. Had Putin indeed informed Xi about his war plan during the Olympic Games, he would have put Xi in a difficult situation: should Xi say, "Yes" or "No"? Either option would be harmful to Xi. If yes, the West would hold Beijing partially responsible for failing to persuade Putin not to start the war. On the contrary, if Putin had said nothing about the war during his meeting with Xi, it would have been a reprieve for Xi, yet demonstrated Putin's disregard of the interests of a cherished strategic partner. Again, either way, Beijing would be in a tricky position regardless of whether it knew in advance about the war. Therefore, saying nothing about the war would have been the better choice for Putin in the first place. This conundrum actually reflects Beijing's awkwardness towards the war since the invasion, as China could not win whether or not it blamed Russia.

In a political sense, the West may have hoped that Beijing had been informed so that it could be labeled an accomplice. Beijing's official denial of knowing about Putin's war plan beforehand has saved it from such a negative image, but this has also exposed the cracks in the Sino-Russian partnership. In a similar situation, it is unimaginable that

³ For instance, "China's Bad Ukraine War," *Wall Street Journal*, March 3, 2022.

⁴ See his opinion piece in *The Washington Post* on March 15, 2022.

⁵ In his October 27, 2022 Valdai speech, Putin actually revealed to the audience that he did not tell Xi about the war during their Beijing summit meeting in February. *Greater China Live*, Shenzhen TV, October 28, 2022.

the United States would initiate a war against an adversary without informing its allies prior to the action. On the other hand, not putting the other side into a difficult situation serves the Sino-Russo partnership well, in that it gives each side a level of freedom to avoid security liability caused by its counterpart. In fact, the question of prior notification is an excellent example to test the depth of the Sino-Russo strategic relationship. When each side strives for strategic autonomy, it underlines the fact that the bilateral relationship is not one of alliance. Keeping a comfortable distance from Moscow is China's choice in shaping a partnership based on its own national interests.⁶

Here, the focal point is Xi's remarks to Putin in their Beijing summit in February 2022 that Sino-Russian relations would have "no limits" in becoming deeper. China has not yet officially defined the term "no limits." Therefore, much guesswork could be mounted about such rhetoric. First, is "no limits" an upgrade from the Sino-Russo "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the New Era," which was Beijing's strategic description of bilateral relations coined during Xi's state visit to Moscow in June 2019? Every word in this 2019 description carries significant meaning. As a starter, the word "strategic" implies a strong security and defense connotation. Secondly, the word "comprehensive" sets the scope of cooperation, which is as wide as possible, clearly going beyond economic interaction. Thirdly, "partnership" reiterates that the bilateral relationship is not one of alliance. Last but not least, the two-word term "new era" was added to the previous description to highlight the new reality of the worsening Sino-US and Russo-US confrontations after Washington identified China and Russia as America's top strategic adversaries.⁷

These four major defining features in the 2019 Xi-Putin description served as the main objects of reference for the two countries to conduct mutual support prior to the Ukraine war. Here, one may wonder if the term "no limits" has furthered the strategic cooperation in the direction of covert alliance-building. This catchphrase has particularly aroused world attention, given the timing the upgrade was uttered – less than one month after the start of Russia's special military operations in Ukraine. Did Putin draw encouragement and become emboldened by this "no limits" rhetoric when he finally ordered the invasion? The Western media seems to have chased such a conclusion. China and Russia had aligned themselves more closely amid the increasingly militarized US containment against them. "No limits" may hint at what Beijing expects Moscow to do

⁶ You Ji, "The Changing Strategic Triangular Relations between China, Russia and America," *Italian Geopolitical Review*, Vol. 20, No., 5, 2020, pp. 183-193.

⁷ See The White House, *National Security Strategy*, Washington D.C., October 28, 2022.

in a worst-case scenario involving a Sino-US showdown: at least keep the United States in a two-front conflict. Likewise, China may be forthcoming in aiding Russia if the latter is squeezed to the point of desperation. However, a case of “no limits” would not include Russia’s invasion of a sovereign state.

Further, the Ukraine war has revealed another side of the new reality of worsening rivalry of major powers: when Russia is fighting a hot war against the entire West, should Beijing be dragged into it under the formula of “no limits”? The Chinese answer is a clear “No.” Following the summit, the Chinese Foreign Ministry later provided an official interpretation of the formula of “no limits,” stating that the term referred to wide-ranging bilateral cooperation, but that this cooperation does have bottom-lines. For instance, in their summit meeting in November 2022, President Xi and Chancellor Scholz of Germany reached a common position against the use of nuclear weapons in Europe.⁸ In this particular point of time, this mutual agreement can be understood as a reference to put Moscow on notice. In a way, “no limits” is a concept for peace-time cooperation, even if it involves security alignment against a common threat. It is not for joint warfare initiated by either side. And it is mainly Beijing’s unilateral rhetoric, not a Sino-Russian bilateral commitment against a third party, e.g., Ukraine, nor practical guidance for Beijing to formulate its Russian policy. Therefore, Beijing’s “no limits” pledge is dialectically both expedient and principled. Clearly, Beijing has its own agenda in managing Sino-US and Sino-EU relations independent of Sino-Russian partnership. Each side avoids becoming trapped by the other’s potential adventurism. For instance, avoiding secondary economic sanctions against China by the West has been Beijing’s top concern in responding to the Ukraine war, which does set the limit in regard to Russia’s war efforts. In sum, “no limits” is a peacetime game, and not applicable to any war situation. Putin may think likewise. He would be non-committal to China in a Sino-US armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait. This is the essence of the bilateral relationship not being one of alliance.⁹

A Nexus of Positive and Negative Assessments of Russian Military Operations

Despite all the negativities to China of the Russian war in Ukraine, many Chinese commentators believe that the war may have somewhat diverted America’s obsessive focus on China. For instance, the war may have lessened the US Indo-Pacific Initiative

⁸ “Chancellor Scholz defends its China trip with accord on nuclear message” [in Chinese], *Reuters*, November 5, 2022.

⁹ Chinese ambassador Qin Gang’s speech to the ASPEN International Forum, July 21, 2022.

against China in terms of troop redeployment and short-term strategic planning.¹⁰ If this is true, it is certainly a positive outcome of the war for Beijing, no matter how minor this diversion may be. With the entire Western world now devoting the bulk of its leadership attention, material resources, and military focus against Russia at the moment, Beijing may have somewhat obtained a little more breathing room for maneuvering in Asia. This would help it to tackle its more urgent challenges at home, such as the waves of COVID-19 outbreaks after termination of the zero-tolerance policy and the growing domestic pressure caused by the economic slow-down.

Additionally, the West's sweeping economic sanctions against Russia may eventually drag Europe into a new round of economic recession. Then the EU may seek to improve EU-China economic relations with geopolitical significance. For instance, the EU has fine-tuned its new China policy and the way it supports the US pressure on China against the backdrop of the emerging new Cold War order in the world. If it is the case that the order-reshaping in Europe after the Ukraine war is a protracted process which pits Russia as the primary target, Chinese security specialists anticipate a temporary easing of EU pressure on China, as indicated by German Chancellor Scholz's visit to Beijing. Scholz opposes US economic decoupling against China, and is supported by the German business community, which increased investment in China by 114% in the first three quarters of 2022.¹¹ French President Macron also renewed his call for strategic autonomy in the wake of US oil sales at a distorted price. In the meantime, Chinese analysts debate whether China's interests would be better served by a short war or a protracted one. A short war would quickly return the world back to normalcy, in which China could do business with other powers with ease. A lengthy war would continue to drag the United States into a two-front fight, not necessarily a bad thing for Beijing. Regardless of whether the war is long or short, China is a victim of the Ukraine war. China's \$9 billion USD investments in Ukraine may be lost in their entirety. China is also Ukraine's largest trading partner, with Sino-Ukraine trade totaling about \$200 billion USD in 2021. China imported goods from Ukraine that it highly valued, such as grain, iron-ore, and parts of military equipment.¹² Now, these imports are wiped out. Moreover, a large proportion of China's European-bound freight through trans-Eurasia railroads has been

¹⁰ Senior Colonel Teng Jianqun (ret.), *News in Focus*, CCTV-4, November 11, 2022.

¹¹ *Greater China Live*, Shenzhen TV, October 30, 2022.

¹² Bonnie Girard, "The Cost of the War to the China-Ukraine Relationship," *The Diplomat*, March 30, 2022.

suspended due to Russia's blockade, a blow to China's Belt and Road Initiative.¹³

Nevertheless, China may have made geopolitical gains due to the Ukraine war. Logically, the war may have slowed down US troop relocation from Europe to Asia. It seems that the Indo-Pacific momentum has been somewhat weakened now. The US military has continued to enhance its presence in Europe, probably at the expense of its original Indo-Pacific deployment plans. As the Ukraine war entered its tenth month and gradually escalated, some conciliatory remarks were heard from Western leaders. In the long meeting of nearly three hours between President Biden and Xi during the G-20 Summit in Bali, Biden reiterated the United States' "five noes" assurances to China, and even congratulated Xi for his third term in office.¹⁴ The Ukraine war seems to have given China additional leverage to offset US pressure. In contrast to China's economic losses due to the war, Sino-Russian military cooperation has become more complicated. On the one hand, it has been strengthened in three key areas: joint war drills, collaborative R&D of military technology, and bilateral military sales.¹⁵ On the other hand, China has intentionally avoided any cooperation that may enhance Russia's military operations in Ukraine. For instance, China has suspended supply of Longxin-3 computer chips, which the PLA widely used in its military modernization. Clearly, the Ukraine war is not a copy of the strategic opportunity period for China's rise in the aftermath of the US war on terror in 2001, nor a reset of Sino-US relations. However, the war could be a protracted drag on the global posture of the United States, forcing it to deal with China and Russia simultaneously.¹⁶

Such a prospect may fulfill some Chinese analysts' spiritual wish of Russia winning the Ukraine war, as this would help divert the West's focus on China, and further drain NATO's resources in the long run. It may not be a relevant question to ask the level of sustainability of US military aid to Ukraine, but some Republican politicians have already expressed reservations about unlimited aid to Ukraine. With the protracted militarized confrontation between Russia and the West, China would be somewhat

¹³ Elliot Wilson, "War in Ukraine threatens BRI, disrupts China-Europe rail freight," *Euromoney*, March 3, 2022.

¹⁴ Five noes: 1) no desire to change China's political system; 2) no intention to seek a new Cold War against China; 3) no plan to seek military confrontation vis-à-vis China; 4) no support for Taiwan's independence; and 5) no change to US policy against "two-Chinas, one-China and one-Taiwan." Biden also pledged to Xi in their summit that Washington had no desire to encircle China through its alliance-building, no desire to economically decouple China, and no desire to disrupt China's development.

¹⁵ *Greater China Live*, Shenzhen TV, October 28, 2022.

¹⁶ "The Invasion of Ukraine is an Opportunity for China," *Japan Times*, March 3, 2022.

cushioned amidst the intensified global geopolitical competition.

The United States is now focusing more on the Russian war efforts, including concerns of a potential nuclear strike against NATO countries. As a result, despite strong rhetoric against China, the level of US antagonist acts against China has been lowered in recent months. For instance, the frequency of US naval vessels conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) inside the 12 nautical miles of China's holdings in the South China Sea (SCS) has been noticeably reduced. Further, the relatively mild tone of Secretary of State Blinken's outline of US China policy on May 26, 2022 also pointed to an easing of confrontation. The lengthy official talk between Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and National Security Advisor Sullivan in Luxembourg on June 13, 2022 achieved some basic mutual understanding of bilateral problems. The warmer than expected atmosphere for the first lengthy face-to-face summit meeting between Xi and Biden in Bali on November 15, 2022 further confirmed Washington's caution towards excessively confronting China. Somewhat eased tensions with China are conducive for Biden to tackle his most urgent challenges at home: US domestic economic problems, such as high inflation and a looming recession. As a result, Washington may remove a portion of tariffs on Chinese imports, which were imposed by President Trump in his trade war with Beijing.

Wishful thinking or not, Chinese defense analysts continue to claim that Russia has the upper hand in the Ukraine war. For instance, they have painted a picture of Russia's positive gains from the invasion as follows:

- 1) Russia's very act of war is an indicator of Putin's great courage to dare to face the entire West single-handedly, which has stimulated Russian patriotism at home;
- 2) NATO blinked to avoid a direct combat engagement with Russia. It has not even drawn a no-flight zone against the Russian military, a clear disappointment for the Ukrainians;
- 3) It would be more difficult for Ukraine now to earn a NATO membership;
- 4) Reconfirmation of Crimea's legal status;
- 5) Russia is forcing a new fait accompli onto Ukraine through its annexation of the four Republics;
- 6) Ukraine's defense and industrial capabilities have been weakened;
- 7) The "Azov" Battalion has been expelled from the East Ukraine region;
- 8) Russia is taking revenge against Ukraine for its disrespect by "teaching it a lesson through invasion." A number of Ukraine cities have been bombed back to "the stone-age."

Here, it is important to point out that, to the Chinese, the results on the battlefield for both sides are not a proper definition of victory in the Ukraine war. To them, what is more relevant is whether Putin has attained his basic objectives in launching the war. If annexation of the four Republics is Putin's initial objective of invasion, he may have obtained what he wanted. Morally, many Chinese do not support Russia's war acts. That being said, they do not hope to see Russia lose the war either, as they consider it a war against US hegemonism.¹⁷

Chinese defense analysts have also assessed the combat performance of Russian soldiers, which differs from evaluations by Western military experts. Some of their counter-arguments are listed below:

- 1) Russian military operations were first of all politicized, and did not aim for occupation of Ukraine with the exception of its eastern regions. For instance, Chinese analysts dispute the West's assertion that Russia's failure to take Kyiv is a failure in the war. Given the scale of Russian troops involved in the Kyiv operations, they had to be a kind of diversion to disguise Russia's real purpose in eastern Ukraine.
- 2) The fast success of the allied operations in the Iraq War is not comparable with Russia's Ukraine operations. It does not apply to Russia's basic criteria for victory. As the Ukraine war is a politicized war, the Russia military had its hands tied in the battlefields from the very beginning. For instance, the Russian Army did not concentrate an overwhelming personnel superiority against its opponent when initiating the war, which was very different from tactics by Allied forces in recent wars, nor did it wage massive aerial or missile strikes, again unlike US operations in the two Iraq wars.
- 3) The factor of casualties has not been as heavily weighted in Moscow as in NATO headquarters. Russia does not have a culture of "body-bags" like that of the United States. It is Russia's own estimation of costs and damages that is more relevant in determining its performance in the war. If Putin's logic of war is built on irredentism (seizing the lost land in east Ukraine) and setting his position in Russia's long history, battlefield performance is only of secondary importance.

¹⁷ Yamaguchi Shinji, "China and the Russia-Ukraine War: The Deepening and Limitation of China-Russia Cooperation against the United States" [in Japanese], *NIDS Commentary*, No. 218, May 12, 2022.

Beijing's military commentators have certainly pointed out many problems in Russia's combat operations in Ukraine. In this aspect, they do share the assessments of their Western counterparts.¹⁸ In fact, the Ukraine war is timely for the PLA to learn the latest developments of battlefield combat in the post-IT era both in terms of military science and practical operations, just like what they learned in the aftermath of the first Iraq war.¹⁹ For instance, Russia's tactics of employing battalion-sized battle groups in combat is also what the PLA has emphasized in its ground force restructuring in its latest round of military reforms. The formation of battalion tactical groups is a dispersed means of operations that is more mobile and agile, and helps avoid heavy human losses under an enemy's aerial superiority and precision strikes. Yet without concentrated manpower superiority, it has been hard for the Russian forces to achieve significant headways in the war. Russia's defects in troop structure, backward communications, and hardware employment sound alarm to the PLA, which has much to think about concerning such forms of combat operations in its own future warfare. Another lesson for the PLA is the massive use of drones by both sides in the war, especially when loitering munitions are used as a basic tool for anti-tank and anti-logistical-supply operations. The use of unmanned combat arsenals has recast the PLA's thinking on the RMA-led transformation and heralds the entry of the era of intelligentized warfare.²⁰

China's Careful Positioning in the Ukraine War

Since the eruption of war, Beijing has been under enormous pressure from the West to choose sides between Russia and Ukraine. To the West, Beijing's resistance to condemn the Russian invasion is tantamount to supporting the Kremlin. Usually there can be hardly a thing called neutrality on the matter of war, at least in terms of morality. In response to the West, Beijing has condemned such pressure embodied in US bullying of "be with us or with our enemy."²¹ While avoiding comments on the nature of the war per se, Beijing has emphasized the complexity of the very causes of the war, especially the NATO eastward expansion. China has abstained in most UN meetings in response

¹⁸ "The showdown in East Ukraine is imminent: the strong and weak points of the two militaries," *Lianhe Zaobao*, April 13 2023.

¹⁹ Andrew Scobell (ed.), *Chinese Lessons from Other People's Wars*, Carlisle: US Army War College, 2011.

²⁰ Xie Kai, et, al, "The revolution of winning mechanism of war in the era of intelligentized warfare," *The PLA Daily*, April 26, 2022, p. 7.

²¹ Blinken's speech for the Webinar *Global Challenges to the 21st Century Diplomacy*, April 14, 2022, University of Michigan.

to West-sponsored bills and vetoed the US proposal to suspend Russia's seat in the UN Human Rights Commission. It is thus logical to describe China's position to be pro-Russia in this regard. On the other hand, Beijing has tried its best to help Ukraine with economic assistance and humanitarian relief. It has lately doubled down efforts to facilitate a cease-fire on the battlefield. On September 23, 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his Ukrainian counterpart in New York during the annual UN conference and expressed China's respect for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.²² In addition, China's official reporting on the war has been evenly balanced, citing briefings by the Russian and Ukraine foreign spokesmen on the war without taking a particular side.

Beijing's Chief National Interests in Judging the War

Beijing's basic attitude towards the Ukraine war is more determined by its strategic evaluation of the new Cold War geopolitics where it has to endure relentless US economic and military pressure. When China is besieged by the intensified bloc-making against it, such as QUAD and NATO's Asian expansion, the question of who initiated the Ukraine war is only of secondary relevance in Beijing's calculation of how to best meet the challenge of the new Cold War order in the advent of the Ukraine war. Specifically, in regard to Russia, Beijing has effectively separated maintenance of an overall positive relationship with Moscow from reacting to the latter's military operations in Ukraine. This underlines Beijing's principled choice of whether to align with Russia further against the US in the off-balanced Sino-US-Russo strategic triangular, or to keep a proper distance from Russia on the invasion issue so that China's vital economic relations with the West can be protected.

Inevitably, the Ukraine war has further precipitated dynamic changes in the Sino-US-Russo strategic triangle and put adrift with many uncertainties ahead. For instance, the US may regard a war-weakened Russia as less of a meaningful peer rival. Beijing, too, may see rising liability in the Sino-Russo strategic partnership in countering Western pressure. And the resultant impact is sufficient to trigger the alteration of the whole international system. Particularly if Russia is indeed crippled by the war and western sanctions, the question to Beijing becomes more acute on how much Beijing needs Russia to balance against US hostility. Should Beijing start to think about distancing itself from Moscow until the clouds of the war are cleaned? For the time being, the answer would

²² *The New China News Agency Report*, New York, September 24, 2022.

be more of a “no,” as intensified US pressure on China and Russia stimulate the two to build closer ties.²³ Beijing must always hypothesize a situation of a Sino-US military clash in the SCS or in the Taiwan Strait. In such a situation, Russia’s practical function of pinning down a proportion of US forces in the European theater would be highly appreciated. This bottom-line of Chinese thinking determines Beijing’s overall calculus of the Beijing-Moscow-Washington triangle. The key to understanding Beijing’s current response to the China-Russia-US trilateral game in the backdrop of the Ukraine war is that Beijing would not want to see Russia fall due to the West’s sweeping sanctions or its battle-field frustrations. If Kissinger’s two-against-one was a winning formula in the Cold War strategic triangular of Beijing-Moscow-Washington, today China is again in such a relatively eased position in the new Cold War era, although Russia is a much weaker partner.²⁴ If the Ukraine war bleeds the Putin regime into a mode of slow collapse or if Putin is forced out of power as a result of the failed war endeavor, Beijing would have to cope with a one-to-one phenomenon of Sino-US confrontation, which would much enhance the US hand in containing China from “a position of strength,” to quote US Secretary of State Blinken’s opening speech in the Anchorage Meeting in March 2021.²⁵ This strategic reality underlines China’s basic stance towards the triangular, with or without a war in Ukraine.

In fact, the Chinese leaders are not really so naive that they believe the Ukraine war would meaningfully distract the US from the Indo-Pacific theater. Strategically, according to US Defense Secretary Austin, Russia is the US’s primary target (acute threat) but China is its pacing challenge,²⁶ meaning that the US will not sideline China as a primary adversary while militarily focusing on the Ukraine war. Washington has its own rhythm to implement containment measures against China at each phase. In the current phase, Washington’s Ukraine war objective is to fatally cripple Russia and have Europe security dependence on US protection further increased.²⁷ Most international

²³ Brandon Yoder, “Power shifts, third-party threats, and credible signals: explaining China’s successful reassurance of Russia,” *International Politics*, Vol. 57, 2020.

²⁴ Lowell Dittmer, “The Strategic Triangle: An Elementary Game-Theoretical Analysis,” *World Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 1981.

²⁵ US Secretary of State Blinken’s opening statement in the meeting with senior Chinese diplomats, March 18, 2021.

²⁶ US Defense Secretary Austin’s testimony on the defense budget to the US Senate Hearing, November 11, 2021.

²⁷ US DoD Secretary Lloyd Austin made it clear in his April 25 speech that the US would like to see Russia weakened sufficiently in the Ukraine war so that it would not pose a serious threat. *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2022.

commentators concur that Washington is arguably the only winner of the Ukraine war. Through the war, it has mended the cracks with Europe, forced Germany and France to challenge Moscow with greater economic and strategic pressure, and made a fortune by selling more energy resources to Europe at a much higher price. Eventually, the US will be in a much better position to command NATO and in a better position against its adversaries, such as China, with stronger NATO support.

Such a conceivable reality means that, after stifling Russia through the Ukraine war, the West would be able to concentrate all its power to deal with China in the next phase of East-West contention, which would make it harder for Beijing to manage its already adverse geopolitical environment. Therefore, Beijing's reaction to the Ukraine war is in general based on its perceived long-term objective of offsetting the intensified Western squeeze, not safeguarding of the vested interests of other states, including Russia. And Beijing's reaction to the war is not very much influenced by any kind of morality about war nor any ideological values. A comparison can thus be drawn between what China does towards Russia with what India does in response to the war: each looks at the war from a cost-benefit lens.²⁸

This means that strategically, Beijing will keep a subtle balance of helping Russia withstand the Western squeeze but not go to any additional lengths to prop up Russia at the expense of its own vital interests. China has substantially increased its import of Russian energy products by 40% in comparison with that of 2021, a great financial boost to cash-starved Russia.²⁹ At the same time, China has refused to provide vital defense equipment to Russia, such as drones, and this has overshadowed their bilateral relations. Chinese firms have complied with some of the Western sanction regimes in scaling down their business ties with Russia, even though China does not openly admit it for fear of an unnecessary backlash from Russia and from its own citizens, many of whom are supportive of Russia. It is likely that Beijing and Moscow achieved some acquiescence in regard to Beijing's position on Russia's Ukraine war. Yet Beijing's search for strategic autonomy has somewhat served as a footnote to a Western definition of Sino-Russo relations, namely the "axis of convenience."³⁰ Over the long run, it is not impossible to imagine an evolutionary process in which the Sino-Russian partnership is de-specialized. More fundamentally, a regime change in Moscow would reset Russian-NATO relations

²⁸ "US 'understands' India's position on Ukraine war," April 12, 2022 <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/us-understands-indias-position-on-ukraine-war-1099944.html>

²⁹ *Xinhua News Agency*, October 25, 2022.

³⁰ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and New Geopolitics*, Brookings, 2008.

with China targeted as a rival. Beijing's handling of its Russian relations is solidly based on its own national interests. After all, only eternal interests matter to all, including China.

China's Response to US Endeavors to Shape the Post-Ukraine War World Order

More generally, Beijing's assessment of its external environment is that it would worsen significantly following the Ukraine war. Specially, the following is the list of challenges that the Chinese strategists contemplate.

- 1) The West's bloc-making will accelerate. Not only will NATO's eastward expansion continue, but also NATO's Asian expansion would become more conceivable, grafting NATO into the US-centered Indo-Pacific security networks more organically.³¹
- 2) The militarization of the new Cold War will deepen, raising it to the level of a worldwide arms race and re-invigorating nuclear threats from both sides. For instance, the Korean Peninsula would see renewed confrontation with thicker nuclear clouds. All the regional sovereignty disputes involving China would be structured into the global geopolitical strife under the US Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), such as the SCS dispute and tensions over Taiwan.
- 3) The West's economic decoupling will deepen in key high-tech and IT sectors in the aftermath of the Ukraine war. Unlocking China from certain critical value chains, such as supply of computer chips, will be stepped up.
- 4) The Western camp will become more united than before the Ukraine war. Fewer countries in Europe will speak up for China.

US Indo-Pacific Offensive: Intensified Bloc Competition

Among Washington's many practical measures against China is its tightening of the IPS amid the Ukraine war. In May 2022, the White House published the Biden edition of the IPS, which puts emphasis on an enhanced coalition approach against China. It

³¹ "NATO reviving Cold War extending its expansionist gaze to the Asia-Pacific," *China Daily* editorial, April 11, 2022.

confirms Washington's pursuits of two parallel fronts against Russia in Europe and China in the Indo-Pacific, although for the time being the former enjoys more priority. Beijing regards the US' relentless coalition building against China under the hostile IPS to be a long-term pacing threat it has to deal with, especially in the Indo-Pacific region where bloc formation becomes increasingly confrontational.³² The danger is multifold.

First of all, this Indo-Pacific bloc rivalry is built on an exclusionary ideological offensive embodied in the notion of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." The West has intensified its values offensive against non-democracies by taking advantage of Russia's war against Ukraine. Even Asian leaders, such as Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, see camp building based on ideational differences as an unfortunate indicator.³³ With the West's new Cold War ideological zeal mounting, many Chinese analysts sense a new end-of-history Crusade in the making against the West's rivals. To Beijing, the new Cold War bloc competition may differ from the old Cold War specifics yet share one fundamental feature with it, which is the West's intense ideational drive against its identified adversaries, such as China and Russia. China is of course a chief target in this powerful ideological campaign.

A number of Indo-Pacific countries, especially those with territorial disputes with China, have been drawn into this bloc competition to varying degrees. They have repeatedly encountered the dilemma of choosing where to stand in between the two top powers. For instance, they have been encouraged to join the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) but worried about the response from their largest trade partner, China, if they indeed follow the US initiative. Such a catch-22 decision is similar to their hesitation on whether to cast their UN votes to condemn Russia in March 2022. Only India has successfully avoided criticizing Russia and received no punishment from the West due to its unique position vis-a-vis China in the Indo-Pacific. However, other countries may not be as lucky.

For instance, under the pressure of bloc-making promoted by the US and its allies, the SCS disputants now entertain narrower space to move around China and the US. On the one hand, they have been pressured to join US-sponsored multilateral war drills aimed at curtailing China's SCS activities. On the other, they hope to stabilize the SCS situation so that they can focus on economic development at home, to which

³² *Xinhua News Agency*, May 22, 2022.

³³ *Lianhe Zaobao*, May 23, 2022.

China is an indispensable contributor.³⁴ Most Southeast Asian countries experience uneasiness in coping with bloc competition, as they manage the off-balanced ASEAN-China-US trilateral relationship in terms of security and economics. With all the regional sovereignty disputes involving China now structured into the global geopolitical strife, none of the implicated states would find it easy to maintain a good relationship with both superpowers simultaneously. They may have faced growing Western pressure of “you are either with us or against us.”

Beijing is now concerned about this bloc competition that has facilitated NATO’s Asian expansion amid America’s Indo-Pacific push. Washington has seized the opportunity of the Ukraine war to extend the West’s anti-Russia campaign beyond Europe, meaning that it is targeting Moscow’s partners elsewhere. In the renewed East-West confrontation, China has become a convenient excuse for NATO expansion into the Indo-Pacific. For instance, the China topic was a hot one in most NATO-sponsored global conferences, such as the conference of national defense ministers in a NATO military base in Germany on April 26, 2022. As the West ties Russia and China together as the villain, a globalized network with a military alliance against them would become institutionalized conveniently under the IPS.

Such a network would be supported by two anchorages, namely the trans-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific mechanisms. Now the world is witnessing a trend of institutional integration of the two: the NATO Asian expansion is embedded in the US Indo-Pacific coalition building. The attendance of Japanese Prime Minister Kishida in the NATO Summit in June 2022 marked the first move in this integration, which alarmed Asian security analysts.³⁵ Interestingly, Tokyo has specifically set the mark of two percent of GDP for its defense budget increase, a figure that aligns with that of NATO. In this process of bloc forging, various Indo-Pacific security frameworks, especially the AUKUS, serve as a carrier and bridge for NATO powers to penetrate into the Indo-Pacific region, which would reshape the international order through the clash of civilizations, values, and military conflicts.

China has not been sitting idly by in response to this globalized coalescence against it. Among the countermeasures it has taken is enhanced military cooperation with Russia, although not under any formal framework of alliance. Yet when assessing the contents

³⁴ Julius Cesar Trajano, “US-Philippines: Resetting the Security Alliance?,” *RSIS Commentary*, No. 035 February 2021.

³⁵ Chen Qingqing and Wan Hengyi, “Japan upping ante on Taiwan question, NATO expansion causes concern in Asia-Pacific,” *Global Times*, June 6, 2022.

of the recent Sino-Russian joint war drills, one can sense the close interconnectivity of the two armed forces to respond to the US-initiated bloc completion. At the height of the Ukraine war in May 2022, China and Russia conducted their joint air patrol inside the Japanese air defense identification zone, followed by their joint maritime exercises in the Japan Sea in September 2022. They both dispatched nuclear-capable bombers and capital ships to the scene with an implicit signal.³⁶ They reminded Japan of the potential nuclear consequences of challenging China and Russia at the urging of the US. NATO did not grant direct personnel support to Ukraine for fear that this could trigger Russia's nuclear retaliation. Tokyo would have to face two nuclear powers had it joined a US-sponsored war against China and Russia.

The Hidden Military Agenda of the Quad

It may have been a forgone conclusion that a mini version of NATO in Asia will eventually emerge, which is Washington's objective in promoting the Indo-Pacific as a strategic counterweight against China's rise.³⁷ However, this paper argues that the core of NATO in Asia would be built on AUKUS rather than the Quad, given India's non-allied positions in its international pursuits. India's non-committal attitudes towards a NATO war against Russia has further testified to the potential holes in the US push for bloc-forging against another nuclear power, such as China, if its relationship with other Quad members is not firmly rested on a formal alliance. For instance, would New Delhi militarily assist Japan in a Russo-Japanese military clash? The answer is quite certain. The official depiction of the Quad is informality.³⁸ As such, it would tie members closely in peacetime, but how it would work in a war of major powers is truly untested.

Yet the foundation of the NATO-Asia framework has to be built on coalescing efforts along the lines of Quad enlargement, which serves as a stepping stone for NATO expansion in Asia. Now each Quad state makes initiatives to invite NATO members to enter bilateral or multilateral defense agreements with them and arrange their participation in joint military exercises in the Indo-Pacific regions. A gradual Quad expansion, although unofficial, is necessary for the US push for bloc formation. The enlargement identifies like-minded states through the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision

³⁶ *Radio France Internationale*, "What Oriental-22 means to Japan" [in Chinese], September 7, 2022.

³⁷ You Ji, "The Nexus of Land and Sea: The Shaper of Future Indo-Pacific Forces," *Australian Army Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2018.

³⁸ Brendon J. Cannon and Ash Rossiter, "Locating the Quad: informality, institutional flexibility, and future alignment in the Indo-Pacific," *International Politics*, March 2022.

which not only helps absorb Asian states into the bloc-making, but also makes NATO involvement relevant under a common-threat narrative.³⁹ Various programs are in place to substantiate a Quad Plus and broaden the entry scope for bloc-enlargement within in the Indo-Pacific framework, including states outside the Indo-Pacific regions.

What is the exact nature of the Quad? This question has been repeatedly raised by China's security experts, although without a unanimous answer. First, as the Quad is a network based on a common threat perception, its military orientation is its primary nature, although in official rhetoric such an emphasis is hidden. Many security analysts in the Quad believe that no other means of response to economic, diplomatic, or ideational threats can be as effective as the one of military pressure based on superiority of defense capabilities, a time-honored part of US military culture.

Secondly, containment of China through military means can be seen from the nature and goals of numerous Quad-sponsored bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral war drills. Their mission design has been clearly set to target China, including exercises of anti-submarine warfare, sea blockade warfare, amphibious warfare, cyber warfare, close-in reconnaissance and monitoring, and so on.⁴⁰

The Ukraine war has sharpened Beijing's sense of the Quad's military orientation and its future expansion. First, the Indo-Pacific militarization based on AUKUS and the Quad reflects the origin of the ongoing European war. The space of ambiguity, meaning a buffer zone previously in existence between nuclear powers, is wiped out in the competition of major powers. This leaves one side to take deadly retaliatory actions despite all reluctance. Second, the small allies and partners of the US exercise little constraints in provoking their big-power opponents in order to achieve their practical interests, believing that the US support to them would effectively deter their big power adversaries from taking military actions to punish them. This is likely where people draw parallels between the Ukraine war and Taiwan conflict.

The Taiwan Parallel

The Chinese are generally sympathetic towards Russia in the Ukraine war because they perceive Russia to have been provoked into initiating this war, and believe that the root cause was NATO's eastward expansion and Ukraine's color revolution against Russia.

³⁹ This vision has been further elaborated by the Japanese Prime Minister in his keynote speech for the 2022 Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore on June 10, 2022.

⁴⁰ You Ji, "Sino-US 'Cat-and-Mouse' Game Concerning Freedom of Navigation and Overflight," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 5-6, 2016, pp. 631-661.

They draw a Ukraine parallel with the joint Washington-Taipei treading on Beijing's red lines in the Taiwan Strait, including increasing visits by senior US officials to Taiwan and more openly acknowledged US-Taiwan military cooperation. This may inflict a dilemma onto Beijing just as Ukraine did to Russia. Taking no forceful action would not only damage Beijing's core interests and international status, and also embolden Taiwan to quicken the slide towards de jure independence and further provocations. Yet any military actions against Taiwan could trigger sweeping Western sanctions against China, similar to those against Russia. This would also hurt China's vital interests.

Likewise, Beijing's war option against Taipei would also create a similar dilemma to Western countries, especially to those of the old Europe which would sustain huge collateral economic damage, if hijacked by US sanction regimes. For instance, Germany, Italy, and France would otherwise be truly reluctant to follow US sanctions against China, their top trading partners, probably more so than their initial reaction to US sanctions against Russia. Yet in the case of a PLA action against Taiwan, they would be left with no choice but to follow US sanctions against China, even though at enormous cost to their economic wellbeing. Certainly they would differentiate the causes of PLA strikes: for the purpose of reunification or for retaliation against Taipei's moves in the direction of de jure independence. The lesson of the Ukraine war is positive for Beijing in that the huge cost of a direct Sino-West confrontation and associated sanctions would lead the West to pressure Taipei more vigorously against its efforts for changing the status quo, which is more likely than a war for reunification by Beijing.

It would be a tragedy to Beijing if it is forced to take military action in the Taiwan Strait to respond to the continued red-line crossing by the US and Taipei authorities. A Taiwan war would definitely put to an end of China's peaceful rise. This may be exactly what the hawkish US politicians hope to see, as provoking Beijing into a short, limited, and controllable war against Taiwan would serve Washington's strategic interests and be doable with minimum cost to the US, just as the Ukraine war has shown. China may experience what Russia today suffers. If an armed conflict indeed occurs, needless to say, the biggest winner from a Beijing-Taipei war would still be the US, while China, Taiwan, East Asia, and Europe would be victimized. Therefore, the lesson of the Ukraine war is profound for all to learn.

The Ukraine parallel has also likely reminded Taiwan of the horror of war in important ways. First, it is not a given that the US would send soldiers to protect Taiwan in the case of a mainland attack. Military aid would be certain, but anything short of putting soldiers on the ground would not be enough for effective protection of Taiwan.

The capability gap between the armed forces across the Taiwan Strait is simply too huge. Secondly, even if China were to be severely sanctioned by the West, this would not be a comfort to Taiwan if its key civilian and military infrastructure was devastated and a large number of people killed, just like in the example of Ukraine which has lost human lives in the thousands and \$600 billion USD in economic assets.⁴¹ Would the Taipei authority allow the island to be used as a proxy for torpedoing China's rise, enduring enormous destruction?

Since the eruption of the Ukraine war, repeated public surveys in Taiwan have recorded a continued drop in popular confidence about the US honoring its commitment to defending Taiwan with its troops on the ground.⁴² Therefore, to the mainlanders and the Taiwanese, the Ukraine war may have them become more sensible and sensitive towards matters of armed confrontation. Beijing will be more careful about the idea of military reunification, and Taipei will become more constrained in its push for *de jure* independence.

Conclusion

As the world watches the unfolding of the first European war on the ground since the end of WWII, the competition between major powers for shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific is also intensifying. Inevitably, the Ukraine war has raised the stakes of major power competition in Eurasia, as it has oriented the regional geopolitical strife in the direction of confrontational bloc-formation. In this process, the US is on the offensive in this theater, mobilizing collective deterrence against China and Russia. For instance, the US has successfully constructed a broad united front against Russia's war in Ukraine and encouraged its allies, such as Australia and Canada, to conduct close-in monitoring activities near China's maritime regions. This has inevitably stimulated Beijing and Moscow to move closer strategically with their accelerated preparation for a war of top powers. The emerging Cold War II is taking the form of "hot" prospects of military brinkmanship.

This paper has highlighted the changing logic and posture of the Beijing-Washington-Moscow strategic triangle. In countering Russian war efforts in Ukraine and the rise

⁴¹ Ukraine Prime Minister Shmyhal told the visiting leaders of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia on March 16 that by mid-March, Ukraine had already suffered \$500 billion in economic losses.

⁴² "The Ukraine war makes fewer Taiwanese convinced of US troop support on the ground to assist Taiwan defense," *Lianhe Zaobao*, March 16, 2022.

of China, Washington employs a more militarized collective approach in deterring its perceived challengers. This approach exercised in Eurasia is best illustrated by the US IPS, which entails: (1) the dominant and driving force of the US, (2) the primary containment building bricks of the two island chain concealment lines and the Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative, (3) the core frameworks of defense cooperation, namely AUKUS, the Quad, and the Five Eyes alliance, and (4) the connecting geopolitical linkages of US-centered bilateral alliances, the IPEF, NATO's Asian expansion, and institutionalized regimes of multilateral military drills. This has formed a vast umbrella with the whole of Eurasia under its cover.

To China, the Ukraine war has sounded a serious warning to all that when a hot war is no longer unimaginable among the top powers, nuclear peace has to be maintained. Structural realism advocates that in order to avoid mutually assured destruction, nuclear powers should not only deter adversaries but also respect their deterrence capabilities.⁴³ Our world today has become increasingly more dangerous exactly because such respect is loosening up. As a result, it is logical to expect that the weaker sides in the Beijing-Washington-Moscow triangular would align more strongly, despite their own conflicts of interests. However, their partnership is way short of that of alliance. They have prescribed autonomy to avoid unnecessary liability in their relationship against the backdrop of their own interaction with the West. On the other hand, if their vital interests are fatally threatened, they would probably go to additional lengths in forging a common response to perceived provocations, including a military one. Therefore, among the lessons to be learned from the ongoing Ukraine war, the critical one is that in the geopolitical competition of nuclear powers, the superior side must respect the red lines (core interests) of its rivals and leave room for compromise for the common good of the world (avoidance of a nuclear exchange). If the envelope is pushed without constraints, the outcome would be suffering for all.⁴⁴

⁴³ Robert Jervis, "The Dustbin of History: Mutual Assured Destruction," *Foreign Policy*, November 2002.

⁴⁴ Xi Jinping's summit with Biden on November 15, 2022, in which he emphasized that the relationship of major powers must not evolve into the state of war. The way to peace is to respect each other's core interests.