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2nd year

**NAVIGATING GREAT POWER DYNAMICS: UKRAINE – CHINA
RELATIONS IN THE AFTERMATH OF RUSSIA’S INVASION IN 2022**

MASTER’S THESIS

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CONFIRMATION

I confirm that I am the author of the submitted *Master's Thesis: Navigating Great Power Dynamics: Ukraine – China relations in the aftermath of Russia's invasion in 2022*, which has been prepared independently and has never been presented for any other course or used in another educational institution, neither in Lithuania, or abroad. I also provide a full bibliographical list which indicates all the sources that were used to prepare this assignment and contains no un-used sources.

Sandra Sirvydytė

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Key words: hedging, Ukraine, China, great power rivalry, changing world order.

Summary: This master's thesis aims to explain Ukraine's foreign policy towards China in the aftermath of the war despite China's close alignment with Russia, as well as the apparent contradiction with Ukraine's primary foreign policy objective of aligning with the Western sphere. Given the reluctance of the West, particularly the U.S, to prioritize Ukraine's victory in the conflict, coupled with delays in military aid, Ukraine was compelled to explore alternative options. The presented analysis demonstrates how in this context China emerged as a potential counterbalance to Russian aggression, offering Ukraine a strategic opportunity to employ hedging strategy, to diversify its alliances and mitigate its vulnerabilities through leveraging the rivalries between the United States, Russia, and China. Ukraine's pragmatic foreign policy showcases a nuanced understanding of great power dynamics and the ability to exploit them to ensure its own security in an increasingly uncertain world order.

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List of Abbreviations

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

EU – European Union

FM – Foreign Minister

NATO – The North Atlantic Treaty Organization

SCS – South China Sea

UNGA – United Nations General Assembly

U.S – United States of America

Introduction

Bilateral relations between Ukraine and China have historically fluctuated between periods of limited cooperation and high-level political engagement. However, recent developments, including China's growing presence in Central and Eastern Europe as well its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have positioned China as an increasingly attractive partner for Ukraine. Despite occasional frustrations, in recent years the relationship has intensified significantly.

However, the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 as the most serious challenge to international world order since WWII¹, marked a critical turning point not just in regional security dynamics but also caused a significant shift in Ukrainian-Sino bilateral relations. The invasion, characterized by its unprecedented scale and brutality, drew condemnation from the international community and revealed stark divisions amongst the world powers. Ukraine's resistance against Russia's aggression is often defined as a fight for freedom, democracy, and rules-based world order². Moreover, Russia and its key allies have been defined as autocratic systems consolidating their efforts to fight freedom and democracy³.

The international community, particularly the Western democracies, have largely sided with Ukraine in condemning Russia's actions and supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity⁴. Western nations have imposed sanctions⁵ on Russia and provided diplomatic, financial, and military assistance to Ukraine in its defense against Russian aggression. This support is framed within the context of defending democratic principles and upholding the post-World War II international world order, based on the respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Although China has repeatedly emphasized the importance of respecting Ukraine's territorial integrity⁶, it has nevertheless refrained from explicitly condemning Russia's invasion. At the same time, China used various international platforms to call against US-hegemonic interests as well as

¹ Ingrid Wuerth Brunk, "Russia, Ukraine, and the Future World Order", Cambridge University Press, vol. 4 (2022):687-697, viewed on 2024 February 26th, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-journal-of-international-law/article/russia-ukraine-and-the-future-world-order/A7F4BFEF6CE7296F4C1AA1A4C9C3C105>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Chandana Seshadri, „Western Sanctions on Russia and the Global South's Stance“, Rusi, viewed on 2024 February 26th, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/western-sanctions-russia-and-global-souths-stance>

⁶ Juan N. Garcia-Nieto, "Year Two: Appraising Chinese Foreign Policy Towards War in Ukraine", China Observers, Viewed on 2024 March 10th, <https://chinaobservers.eu/year-two-appraising-chinese-foreign-policy-towards-the-war-in-ukraine/>

assigned the blame for the war to NATO⁷ – whom Ukraine seeks to join⁸. In addition, China has opposed the imposition of sanctions by Western countries against Russia and deepened its economic and strategic partnership with Moscow⁹. By 2023, Chinese-Russian trade reached record high of \$240 billion. Moreover, China's strategic alliance with Russia is underscored by the former's supply to the latter of critical dual-use components and technological elements, which are subsequently integrated into Russia's military manufacturing sector¹⁰. And whilst China's support for Russia in its war against Ukraine is not direct, Western nations have labelled Beijing's support as a lifeline to Russia's war machine¹¹, resulting in strained relations between Beijing, Brussels and Washington.

China's close alignment and support for Russia in the context of its war against Ukraine are viewed as siding with the autocratic regime against democratic norms and principles, contributing to the perception of China being on the opposition to the international world order¹². However, despite China's tacit support for Russia's actions in Ukraine, which has impaired its relations with Western allies, Ukraine has refrained from publicly criticizing China. Ukrainian officials, including President Zelenskyy and Foreign Minister Kuleba, have extended invitations to Chinese leadership to participate in peace negotiations¹³ and post-war recovery efforts¹⁴, highlighting Ukraine's pragmatic approach to engage with all potential stakeholders in resolving the conflict. This stance contrasts with Ukraine's usual vocal criticisms of Western partners for delays in military aid or perceived inaction by international bodies like the United Nations Security Council in addressing Russia's invasion. Instead of condemning China's strategic partnership with Russia, Ukrainian officials have actively sought Chinese involvement in peace efforts and recognizing China's

⁷ Alicja Bachulska, Mark Leonard, "China and Ukraine: The Chinese debate about Russia's war and its meaning for the world", European Council on Foreign Relations, viewed on: 2024, March 30th, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/china-and-ukraine-the-chinese-debate-about-russias-war-and-its-meaning-for-the-world/>.

⁸ George Glover, "Trade between China and Russia ballooned to a record \$240 billion last year", Business Insider, Viewed on 2024 February 24th, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-russia-trade-record-ukraine-war-xi-jinping-vladimir-putin-2024-1>

⁹ Pierre-Marie Meunier, "Russia-Ukraine War: China's Vanishing Neutrality", The Diplomat, viewed on: 2024 February 24th, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/russia-ukraine-war-chinas-vanishing-neutrality/>

¹⁰ Tracy Wen Liu, Peter Guest, "How China's ad-hoc tech pipeline fuels Russia's Ukraine war efforts" Nikkei Asia, viewed on 2024 March 5th, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/How-China-s-ad-hoc-tech-pipeline-fuels-Russia-s-Ukraine-war-efforts>

¹¹ Alicja Bachulska, Mark Leonard, "China and Ukraine: The Chinese debate about Russia's war and its meaning for the world", European Council on Foreign Relations, viewed on: 2024, March 30th, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/china-and-ukraine-the-chinese-debate-about-russias-war-and-its-meaning-for-the-world/>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Olena Harmash, "Ukraine invites China's Xi to 'peace summit' – Zelenskiy's top advisor", Reuters, viewed on 2024 March 2nd, <https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-invites-chinas-xi-peace-summit-zelenskiys-top-adviser-2024-01-26/>

¹⁴ Amy Chew, "Volodymyr Zelensky seeking 'direct talks' with China's Xi Jinping to help end Russia's invasion of Ukraine", South China Morning Post, viewed on 2024 March 8th, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3187580/volodymyr-zelensky-seeking-direct-talks-chinas-xi-jinping-help>

continued importance as Ukraine's primary trading partner. Therefore, Ukraine's stance towards China appears paradoxical. While Chinese opposition to the international world order strained its relations vis-à-vis Ukraine's key allies, Ukraine itself has adopted a strategic position to maintain cordial relations between Kiev and Beijing. Moreover, in the face of rising rivalry between major powers of the U.S-Russia-China triangle, Ukraine chooses to navigate between these major powers, instead of aligning with either side.

Ukraine's key ally – Washington, and Beijing, has inevitably affected Ukrainian-Sino relations as the war in Ukraine is perceived through the lens of a broader geopolitical clash between US-led Western powers and Russia and China led autocratic regime. Ukraine's ambiguous position and choice to accept China's "neutral" stance, is in a stark contrast with Ukraine's allies, signaling Ukraine's reluctance to be drawn into the broader intensification of US-China rivalry.

The research problem of the thesis: Western nations have categorized China as pro-Russian, accusing it of aligning with an aggressor intent on challenging and destabilizing the rules-based international order. Amidst this confrontation between democratic and authoritarian regimes, Ukraine, paradoxically accepts China's position as "neutral" and is seeking closer economic and political cooperation with China. While existing academic literature extensively covers Russian-Sino, American-Russian and Sino-American relations, there is a noticeable gap in understanding Ukrainian-Sino relations, particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Therefore, this thesis aims to bridge this gap by examining how Ukraine navigates its bilateral relations with China, given the apparent contradiction with its primary foreign policy direction of aligning with the Western bloc.

Therefore, the main question raised: how to explain Ukraine's foreign policy towards China in the aftermath of the war despite China's close alignment with Russia?

Hypothesis: Ukraine's foreign policy is caused by hedging strategy and aimed at instrumentalizing rivalries between the U.S-Russia-China. Those rivalries are also preventing Ukraine from openly taking sides (except in relations to Russia). In addition, the hesitation by the West to aim for Ukraine's victory as well as to prolong delays in supplying military aid, forces Ukraine to seek alternative options, with China emerging as a potential counterbalance to Russia.

The object of the research is the evolving relations between Ukraine and China in the aftermath of Russia's invasion, taking into consideration the complexities arising from China's perceived pro-Russian stance.

The thesis aims to fill the research gap on the Ukraine-China relations in the aftermath of the war which is not discussed in the Ukrainian academic literature let alone in the Englishspeaking academic literature.

To answer the question, the following **tasks of this thesis** are:

1. to review the academic literature of the historic evolution of Ukrainian-Sino bilateral relations;
2. to present theoretical framework – hedging strategy;
3. to analyze China’s response to the war in Ukraine and how it impacted bilateral relations between Ukraine and China;
4. to analyze Ukraine’s governments officials’ statements and public interviews that reveal Ukraine’s hedging strategy towards China;
5. to analyze Ukraine’s and China’s perception of each other amidst the war in Ukraine and how it reflects current bilateral relationship between the two countries;
6. to explain Ukraine’s motivation in choosing to accept China’s pro-Russian “neutrality”;
7. to provide an overview of the great power competition of U.S-Russia, Russia-China, and U.S-China and to demonstrate how the rivalry between these great powers provides Ukraine with an opportunity to avoid full alignment with either of them.

Therefore, the main objective of this thesis: to provide a comprehensive analysis of a nuanced evolution of Ukraine – China relations in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

1. Literature review

1.1. Overview of historic relationship

Ukraine's foreign policy trajectory since gaining independence has been characterized by a complex balancing act between its Western aspirations, historical ties with Russia, and, more recently, emerging engagements with China. While initially focused on consolidating relations with Western nations and managing its relationship with Russia, Ukraine has gradually expanded its diplomatic outreach to include China as a significant player in its foreign policy calculus.

1.2. Bilateral relations 1991-2014

The bilateral relationship between Ukraine and China has evolved dynamically since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1991¹⁵, coinciding with Ukraine's independence. China promptly recognized Ukraine's sovereignty, laying the foundation for diplomatic cooperation. However, despite this initial gesture, bilateral relations were lacking substantial mutual interests.

A pivotal shift occurred in 2001 under the leadership of Ukraine's second President, Leonid Kuchma¹⁶, who pursued a multi-vector foreign policy approach aimed at diversifying Ukraine's international partnerships. This strategy led to the signing of the "Joint Declaration on Friendship and Comprehensive Cooperation in the 21st Century" between Ukraine and China, marking a significant milestone in bilateral relations. President Kuchma's proactive engagement included multiple visits to China, signaling Ukraine's commitment to strengthening ties with Beijing.

One of the notable developments during President Kuchma's tenure was the elevation of Ukraine's status to a key partner in Eastern Europe by the Chinese leadership during his official visit to China in 2003. This recognition underscored China's growing interest in deepening cooperation with Ukraine, particularly in the context of broader regional dynamics¹⁷The period following the Orange Revolution, which unfolded in Ukraine from late November 2004 to January 2005¹⁸, marked a significant juncture in the country's political landscape. This series of protests precipitated profound political transformations within Ukraine, which were closely observed by international actors, including China. From China's perspective, such events, commonly referred to as "Color

¹⁵ Embassy of Ukraine in the People's Republic of China, "Political Relations between Ukraine and China", Governmental website, viewed on 2024 February 20th, <https://china.mfa.gov.ua/en/partnership/political-relations-between-ukraine-and-china>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jakub Jakobowski, "Under the radar of big politics: cooperation between China and Ukraine", Centre for Eastern Studies, viewed on 2024 March 10th, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2021-06-02/under-radar-big-politics-cooperation-between-china-and-ukraine>

¹⁸ Ibid.

Revolutions," were often viewed as manifestations of Western interference in the internal affairs of sovereign nations¹⁹.

Following the political changes in Ukraine, particularly with the ascension of President Yuschenko, who aligned strongly with Western interests, diplomatic, economic, and political relations between Ukraine and China experienced a period of relative minimal engagement. However, a notable shift in Ukrainian-Sino relations occurred from 2010 to 2013 under Viktor Yanukovich Presidency, who pursued a multi-vector foreign policy²⁰. Yanukovich was maintaining close ties with both Russia and the European Union while also prioritizing relations with China. Under Yanukovich's leadership, Ukraine and China significantly improved their diplomatic ties. In 2011, Ukraine and China formally established strategic partnership by signing 'Strategic Partnership Agreement'²¹. This agreement marked a significant milestone in their bilateral relations, signifying a deeper level of cooperation and mutual interest in various areas, including trade, investment, and cultural exchange²². Ukraine's proposals for establishing a visa-free regime for Chinese citizens²³ has further shaped the trajectory of bilateral relations. Intergovernmental cooperation between Ukraine and China, facilitated by periodic meetings and discussions across various sectors and China's growing interest in Ukraine's technological and agricultural sectors contributed to the significant increase in trade volume. Ukraine also emerged as a key player in addressing China's food security concerns, with the Ukrainian agricultural sector gaining access to the lucrative Chinese market.

1.3. Bilateral relations 2014-2022

However, the Revolution of Dignity and subsequent political upheavals in Ukraine in 2014 ushered in a new phase in Ukraine-China relations. China refrained from overtly condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine, underscoring its desire to maintain stable relations with all key players.

Oleksiy Koval and Sergii Koshovyi in their Foreign Policy Audit on Ukrainian-Chinese relations

¹⁹ Kawashima Shin, "Perception of a "Cold Revolution" in China under Xi Jinping Regime and National Security Implications-Close interconnection between domestic politics and diplomacy", *Asia Pacific Review* vol. 30 (2024):79-98.

²⁰ Oleksiy Koval et al., "Foreign Policy Audit. How to revive Ukrainian-Chinese relations", Euromaidan Press, viewed on 2019 March 2 nd , <https://euromaidanpress.com/2016/12/07/ukraine-china-international-relations-silk-road-trade/>.

²¹ Vitaly Portnikov, „Kyiv Caught Somewhere Between China and Taiwan“, *Visegrad Insight*, viewed on 2024 April 10th, <https://visegradinsight.eu/kyiv-caught-somewhere-between-china-and-taiwan/>

²² Sergiy Gerasymchuk, "Ukraine and China: Growing mutual interests amidst increasing international turbulence", *Ukraine Analytica* vol. 1 (2019): 7-14.

²³ Liza Semko, „China and Ukraine agree on visa-free regime“, *Kyiv Post*, viewed on 2024 March 20th, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/10746>

explain that Revolution of Dignity had complicated Ukraine-China relations²⁴ and underscored the challenges of navigating the geopolitical tensions in the region²⁵. While China remained committed to its policy of non-interference and advocated for dialogue and diplomatic solutions, its proposal for a coordinated international mechanism to address the Crimean issue went disregarded. Moreover, China known for prioritizing direct contacts between leaders and for being cautious about revolutionary movements, which are often viewed with suspicion in Beijing²⁶. Therefore, while promising agreement between two countries may have been signed, once Yanukovich fled the country and Ukraine went under significant political changes, chances of implementation of those agreements in the short term were limited. Important to note, that strategic documents which President Yanukovich and President Xi Jinping signed in 2011 and 2013 moving Ukraine-China bilateral relations into strategic partnership²⁷, following political turbulences were not ratified by Chinese side. It's important to note that strategic documents signed by President Yanukovich and President Xi Jinping in 2011 and 2013, which aimed to elevate Ukraine-China bilateral relations to a strategic partnership, were not ratified by the Chinese side after the political turbulence in Ukraine. Additionally, several interviewed experts including Burtsev, Yefremov, Gobova, Merezhko, and Skypchenko, explained that the Ukrainian government often references this strategic agreement when discussing relations with China, but the treaty has not been ratified by China. For the treaty to become effective, it must be signed by both parties. Moreover, the document itself is not publicly available in either Ukrainian or Chinese domains. Merezhko draws attention to a particular aspect of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed by Yanukovich and Xi in 2013, notably Article 7. This article mandates consultations between Ukraine and China in the event of danger, aiming to immediately remove the danger. He points that this article would allow Ukraine to have influence on China in the current status quo, when Russia's threat in Ukraine is apparent. But even though Ukraine ratified the treaty in 2014, it holds no legal power since lacks Chinese ratification²⁸.

Moreover, Russia remained Ukraine's largest trading partner but there were efforts to diminish economic interdependence with aggressor state. In these circumstances, the Ukrainian government began to pay considerable significance to the strategic partnership agreement, which was signed with

²⁴ Oleksiy Koval et al., "Foreign Policy Audit. How to revive Ukrainian-Chinese relations", Euromaidan Press, viewed on 2019 March 2nd, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2016/12/07/ukraine-china-international-relations-silk-road-trade/>.

²⁵ Oleksiy Koval et al., "Foreign Policy Audit. How to revive Ukrainian-Chinese relations", Euromaidan Press, viewed on 2019 March 2nd, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2016/12/07/ukraine-china-international-relations-silk-road-trade/>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Oleksandr Merezhko, interview with author, Vilnius, 2024 March 22nd

China in 2013, recognizing China as robust trade partner and a viable trade alternative to Russia. However, Ukraine's leading think tank Ukraine Prism notes that in from 2014 to 2016, Ukraine-China relations were not developing at all and in 2016 reached their lowest stage²⁹ in terms of political exchanges. Apart from a brief encounter between Presidents Poroshenko and Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington D.C., no significant high-level political engagements occurred. Report notes that China noticeably refrained from political dialogues with Ukraine during this period, opting instead to emphasize pragmatic and economic considerations in bilateral relations. China's focus on Ukraine's potential as a gateway to Europe, particularly in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), underscored its economic interests, while political dialogue barely existed³⁰.

And although the absence of progress in political relations was evident, economic relations generally followed an upward trend. Sergiy Gerasymchuk in the report titled: „Ukraine and China: „Growing mutual interest amidst increasing international turbulence” notes that Russia has tried to label Ukraine as a failed state to limit Ukrainian-Sino economic ties³¹. Despite this, China has showed tremendous economic interest in Ukraine's agriculture, technology and military sectors. Since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 to 2019, agricultural trade between two states increased by 56%. Moreover, in the face of US-China rivalry and 'trade wars', in 2018 Ukraine replaces US and becomes largest food supplier to China³². Moreover, Chinese interests are not solely in Ukraine's grain and corn. China has also been very interested in Ukraine's technology. Ukraine, which once held the key position of production of military industries in former Soviet Union, offers access to military systems which are seen by Chinese to improve their military. Ukraine inherited approximately 35% of Soviet era of military capacity and therefore has played a significant role in China's military modernization³³. China managed to purchase wide range of Soviet heritage powers, aircraft carries and key equipment for tank engines and air-to-air missiles³⁴. National Institute Of Strategic Research of Ukraine notes that China, with its key interest in Ukraine's technology increase their investment significantly and

²⁹ Olena Bordylovksa et al., "Foreign Policy 2016", Foreign Policy Council "Ukraine Prism", Kyiv, 2017, https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Scorecard-2016_eng.pdf .

³⁰ Olena Bordylovksa et al., "Foreign Policy 2016", Foreign Policy Council "Ukraine Prism", Kyiv, 2017, https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Scorecard-2016_eng.pdf

³¹ Sergiy Gerasymchuk, "Ukraine and China: Growing mutual interests amidst increasing international turbulence", *Ukraine Analytica vol. 1* (2019): 7-14.

³² Ibid, 10.

³³ Ibid, 11.

³⁴ Alla Hurska, "China's Growing Interest in Ukraine: A Window of Opportunity or Point of Concern?", The Jamestown Foundation, viewed on 2024 March 2nd, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-growing-interest-in-ukraine-a-window-of-opportunity-or-a-point-of-concern/>

becomes an important key element in Ukraine's Far Eastern Foreign Policy Vector³⁵.

From 2019 to 2021, the volume of Ukrainian exports to China increased significantly, both in terms of value and in kind, in particular, despite the global Covid-19 pandemic, Ukrainian exports to China doubled. For example, in 2020, the export of pig iron increased almost 7 times, barley - three times, corn, iron ore and concentrates - twice, sunflower oil - by 64%. Moreover, by 2021 trade between Ukraine and China reached record high of \$18.9 billion³⁶. While each year from 2014, but particularly from 2016, economic relations between the two countries experienced an upward trajectory, Ukraine also concurrently pursued its aspirations to join Western alliance's such as NATO and the EU³⁷. In addition, Ukraine was heavily relying on the U.S financial assistance to counter Russia's aggression in the Donbass region³⁸. This period coincided with heightened rivalry between the U.S and China under President Trump's administration. Consequently, Ukraine found itself delicately balancing between these two competing interests—strengthening economic ties with China while securing military aid from the U.S. However, this strategic balancing act has not been without challenges.

1.4. Navigating Great Powers: Ukraine's Struggle Amidst Clashing Interest s

Navigating the complex landscape of great power dynamics, particularly between the United States and China, has posed challenges to Ukraine in the past. Motor Sich case stands as a prime example, where Ukraine's decisions were shaped by strategic calculations. The Motor Sich acquisition attempt by a Chinese-owned company and Ukraine's subsequent actions in response to pressure from the United States reflects Ukraine's nuanced approach to safeguarding national interests while maximizing economic opportunities.

Motor Sich, Ukraine's aerospace company known for being one of the world's largest manufacturers of aircraft engines, became the focal point of contention when in 2016 Chinese owned company Skyrizon Aircraft attempted to acquire it. Motor Sich faced some financial difficulties and therefore Ukrainian government initially supported the potential acquisition of the company³⁹.

³⁵ A. Z., Honcharuk et al., "FAR EAST VECTOR AS AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT FOREIGN POLICY OF UKRAINE", National Institute of Strategic Research, viewed on 2024 March 10th, <https://www.niss.gov.ua/sites/default/files/2017-11/dalekoshid-ec76e.pdf>

³⁶ Nataliya Butyrska, "Ukraine's Futile Struggle to Win China's Support over the Russian aggression", China observers, viewed on 2024 March 2nd, <https://chinaobservers.eu/ukraines-futile-struggle-to-win-chinas-support-over-the-russian-aggression/>

³⁷ Alina Hrytsenko, "HOW DOES THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR CHANGE ASIAN GEOPOLITICS?", Ukraine Prism, vol. 2 (2022):27-36.

³⁸ Council of Foreign relations, "War in Ukraine", viewed on 2024 April 2nd, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>

³⁹ Jakub Jakobowski, Krystztof Nieczypor, "Under the radar of big politics: cooperation between China and Ukraine", Centre for Eastern Studies, viewed on 2024 March 10th, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2021-06-02/under-radar-big-politics-cooperation-between-china-and-ukraine>

However, this move sparked comprehension by the United States, Ukraine's primary ally. Given highly sensitive nature of Motor Sich's technology, the U.S opposed Chinese attempt to modernize their military even further⁴⁰.

The pressure exerted by the U.S on Ukraine was evident on multiple fronts. Initially, the Trump administration's decision to withhold \$391 million in crucial military aid to Ukraine⁴¹, vital for its defense against Russian aggression, sent a strong message. This stance was further reinforced during National Security Advisor John Bolton's visit to Kiev, where he held discussions with top executives of Motor Sich. Bolton explicitly warned against the sale of the company to China⁴², emphasizing Washington's unwavering stance on the matter. Notably, from 2014 to 2018, the US provided \$1.5 billion in military support to Ukraine⁴³ to bolster its defense capabilities against Russian aggression. The linkage of the Motor Sich issue to a 'review' of military aid spending to Ukraine underscored Washington's concerted efforts to prevent China from acquiring the company.

Ukrainian government, which was initially supportive of China's attempt to buy the company⁴⁴, now find itself under immense pressure. Washington's strong stance on this deal left Ukrainian authorities with a dilemma: whether to accept Chinese offer and as a result jeopardize strategic relations with the U.S, - or, to abandon the deal despite the company's current financial problems. Moreover, not selling the company, put Ukraine at the risk of straining its relations with China. Nevertheless, shortly after Bolton's visit, Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksandr Danyluk stated that Ukrainian authorities "understand the concerns of the Americans⁴⁵" and therefore, Ukrainian authorities gave up under US pressure and launched an investigation into the legality of the deal, citing concerns about national security and the protection of strategic assets⁴⁶. In 2018, Ukraine's government intervened and altogether blocked the acquisition of Motor Sich by Chinese investors. This decision resulting from pressure by U.S and initially led to a legal dispute between Motor Sich and Chinese investors. While legal battles continue, Washington continues to oppose the deal which would allow China to take over aircraft engine manufacturing technology. The

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Karoun Demirjian et al. "Trump ordered hold on military aid days before calling Ukrainian president, sources say", Washington Post, viewed on 2024 March 5th, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-ordered-hold-on-military-aid-days-before-calling-ukrainian-president-officials-say/2019/09/23/df93a6ca-de38-11e9-8dc8-498eabc129a0_story.html

⁴² Oksana Bedratenko, "Ukraine Defense Firm Caught Up in US-China Rivalry Probed for 'Subversion'", Voa News, viewed on 2024 March 5th, https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_us-politics_ukraine-defense-firm-caught-us-china-rivalry-probed-subversion/6175347.html

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Bret Forrest, "U.S Aims to Block Chinese Acquisition of Ukrainian Aerospace Company", The Wall Street Journal, viewed on 2024 March 5th, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-aims-to-block-chinese-acquisition-of-ukrainian-aerospace-company-11566594485>

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

U.S.'s opposition to the deal marked a significant shift in its stance toward Chinese economic expansion and signaled a clear opposition to the growing Chinese influence in the Ukraine. When President Zelenskyy was elected in 2019, Motor Sich acquisition has already been blocked. In the interview with 'Axios' on Motor Sich, Zelensky objected to labelling China as 'number one geopolitical threat', adding: 'we don't feel this in Ukraine'. Though stating that no foreign entity shall control Ukraine's defense-industry champion, Zelenskyy otherwise encouraged the presence of Chinese business in Ukraine (Interview of the President of Ukraine for the Axios program broadcast on the HBO platform — Official website of the President of Ukraine)

Motor Sich case demonstrates the complexities of managing relationship with both great powers in the face of growing confrontation between the U.S and China. In this case Ukraine had to align its position with Washington due to the aspirations to join Western alliances as well as secure continuity in military aid from the U.S.

However, there are occasions where Ukrainian politicians strategically prioritize relations with China when it best served Ukraine's interests. Ukraine's willingness to pursue its own national interest in the face of increasing great power rivalry has been demonstrated with another case, when Ukraine decided to side with China. When President Volodymyr Zelesnky assumed office in 2019, his administration articulated a clear foreign policy agenda which reflected Ukraine's aspirations to manage close ties with both Western countries, and China⁴⁷. While Ukraine had joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017⁴⁸, its involvement had largely been symbolic and had not yielded tangible benefits until President Zelenskyy took office. In a pivotal call between President Zelenskyy and Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2021, Zelenskyy praised the Chinese presence in Ukraine, calling on China as "Ukraine's number one trade and economic partner⁴⁹" and expressed eagerness to strengthen economic ties even further⁵⁰. Subsequently, Ukraine and China signed contracts worth \$3 billion in the transportation and energy sectors within the framework of the BRI⁵¹, signaling a deepening of economic engagement. This shift in Ukraine's approach to the BRI under Zelenskyy's leadership indicates a strategic pivot towards leveraging economic opportunities with China, underscores the substantive nature of the evolving and deepening Ukrainian-Sino cooperation.

⁴⁷ National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, *Decree of the President of Ukraine on the National Security Strategy of Ukraine 2020 September 14 No. 107*, Kyiv, 2020, <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3922020-35037>

⁴⁸ Pushkar Pushp, "Ukraine-Russia Crisis: Belt and Road Initiative and China's diplomacy", *Modern Diplomacy*, viewed on 2024 March 3rd, <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2022/03/08/ukraine-russia-crisis-belt-and-road-initiative-and-chinas-diplomacy/>

⁴⁹ Kyiv Post, "Zelensky, Chinese President Xi Jinping hold first telephone conversation", viewed on 2024 March 10th, <https://archive.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/zelensky-chinese-president-xi-jinping-hold-first-telephone-conversation.html>

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Zongyuan Zoe Liu, "What's at Stake for China's Economic Relationship with Ukraine", *Council on Foreign Relations*, viewed on 2024 March 3rd, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/whats-stake-chinas-economic-relationship-ukraine>

Notably, these contracts were finalized shortly after Ukraine withdrew from a joint statement, endorsed by over 40 countries, calling for an independent investigation into human rights abuses in China's Xinjiang region⁵². Analysts and experts have interpreted Ukraine's decision to pursue infrastructure deals with China while withdrawing from the joint statement, initially supported by the U.S, as a calculated move to secure economic benefits despite potential geopolitical repercussions. Furthermore, this demonstrates Ukraine's pragmatic approach to balancing between competing interests. Seeking to secure infrastructure deals with China, Ukraine strategically opted to prioritize economic gains over geopolitical alignment. This calculated decision reflects Ukraine's willingness to navigate a delicate diplomatic landscape to maximize returns for its national interests.

Over the years, Ukraine's foreign policy has undergone significant transformations, influenced by its aspirations for European integration, historical ties with Russia, and emerging engagements with China. Political changes within Ukraine, such as Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity have significantly impacted Ukraine's relations with China, leading to fluctuations in engagements levels. Nevertheless, China has demonstrated interest in Ukraine's core sectors such as agriculture and military technology, resulting into growing trade relations between two states. Moreover, despite facing challenges inherent in navigating great power dynamics, Ukraine was focused on safeguarding its national interests and building pragmatic relations with China, aiming for more investments in Ukraine's infrastructure through BRI.

2. Theoretical framework – the concept of hedging

China's rapid rise as a global power and its assertive maritime expansion in the South and East China Sea, coupled with its intensifying competition with the United States, have exacerbated the perception of a great power rivalry. Furthermore, Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022 has further fueled the existing debates and challenges for the US-led liberal global order. Theorist Gilford Ikenberry argues that the current situation in the international arena reflects the crisis in the US-led international order. The Biden administration has continuously highlighted the increasing competition between the Western democratic, and the autocratic regimes in the East, urging nations to support the former and uphold the rules-based international system⁵³. This ongoing competition among the major powers poses a dilemma for the secondary and smaller states, impacting their political, security, and

⁵² Jamey Keaten, "AP Exclusive: Diplomats say China puts squeeze on Ukraine", AP News, viewed 2024 March 9th, <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-china-europe-ukraine-health-a0a5ae8f735b92e39e623e453529cbb9>

⁵³ Yifan Ding, Alice Ekman, "China-Europe relations, Two-Years After Russia Invaded Ukraine", Carnegieendowment, viewed on 1 March, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2024/03/china-europe-relations-two-years-after-russia-invaded-ukraine?lang=en¢er=global> .

economic interests. Consequently, an increasing number of states are opting to resist to be drawn into the great power rivalry and are instead adopting a strategy of hedging⁵⁴.

Hedging strategy emerged as an alternative to two the most used alignment models: bandwagoning and balancing⁵⁵. Balancing refers to a state's decision to counter a powerful or threatening states⁵⁶. Conversely, bandwagoning refers to a state's decision to align with the most powerful or rising power for either security or profit⁵⁷. Both of these require states to choose and align with one of the great powers. However, since the world order paradigm is slowly shifting from the U.S-centric hegemonic order towards a more multi-polar structure, states are becoming more interconnected than ever before⁵⁸. Therefore, hedging offers a third strategic option by combining elements from both balancing and bandwagoning strategies and provides third strategic option to stay in the middle by neither fully aligning with one major power⁵⁹.

It is important to note that there is no single accepted definition of hedging in the academic literature. However, most of the hedging-related research is based on the analysis of the Asian geopolitical dynamics, in the context of China's increasingly assertive posture and ambitions to become not only the regional hegemon but also the leading power globally, which is perceived as the greatest challenge to the current world order⁶⁰.

In one of the field's pioneering works, Evelyn Goh, demonstrates how Southeast Asian nations as small powers adopted strategies involving deeper engagement with China, while also c countries, smaller powers have adopted strategies involving deeper engagement with China while also concurrently seeking to maintain ties with the United States⁶¹. Goh defines hedging as a strategic approach aimed at navigating situations where states cannot easily opt for traditional alternatives like balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality⁶². She identifies three components of hedging behavior in the context of Southeast Asia: indirect or soft balancing, complex engagement, and enmeshment policy⁶³. These states engage in hedging to mitigate three potential undesirable outcomes: Chinese dominance

⁵⁴ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective", *China International Strategy Review*, vol.3, (2001)300–315.

⁵⁵ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to rising China", *Contemporary Southeast Asia A Journal and Strategic Affairs* vol. 30, (2008): 159-185.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 161.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 161.

⁵⁸ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective", *China International Strategy Review*, vol.3, (2001)300–315.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 163

⁶⁰ Nicholas Ross Smith, "When Hedging Goes Wrong: Lessons from Ukraine's Failed Hedge of the EU and Russia", *Global Policy* vol. 11, (2020): 541-649.

⁶¹ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective", *China International Strategy Review*, vol.3, (2001)300–315.

⁶² Evelyn Goh, "Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S in Southeast Asia Regional Security Strategies", *Policy Studies* vol. 16, (2005):1-82

⁶³ *Ibid*, 6.

or hegemony, US. disengagement from the region, or regional instability⁶⁴Goh argues that states with less dependence on one or both major powers and greater regional security influence tend to seek more maneuvering space, leading to a stronger tendency to adopt hedging strategies⁶⁵. The author's research explains hedging to be a way for small states to remain ambiguous over the extent of their shared security interests with the established power before the future great power war would take place hence small states can maintain neutrality. Therefore, by holding such position, small states, until the very last moment, are guaranteed to have a larger probability to side with the victor which is the major advantage of the hedging⁶⁶. In simple words, small states use it as an insurance policy. In contrast, according to Goh, if a state could simply be able to remain neutral, there would be no need to pursue hedging, but such an option rarely exists for the increasingly vulnerable smaller states navigating the intensifying contentious regional dynamics⁶⁷. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Goh does not define hedging against China's rise as a reaction to an uncontrollable external risk. Conversely, she interprets the hedging behavior of Southeast Asian states as an act to manage the source of risk, i.e., the rise of China itself.

In recent years, a growing body of research by scholars such as Kuik (2008), Jackson (2014), Zhao and Qi (2016), Wang (2018), Koga (2018), Haacke (2019), Korolev (2019), and Smith (2020) has further expanded the literature on hedging strategies among smaller power⁶⁸. These studies focus on the dynamics of smaller powers relations with both China and the United States. The overarching argument put forth by these scholars is that when confronted with uncertain geopolitical circumstances, smaller powers often adopt a middle position strategy, avoiding alignment with either major power to minimize potential risks and maintain a degree of autonomy.

The definition of hedging strategies varies amongst scholars and is not easily conceptualized. However, one aspect of smaller powers' hedging which can be more precisely categorized is alignment. Lim and Cooper define hedging as 'an alignment choice involving the signaling of ambiguity over the extent of shared security interests with great powers⁶⁹'. In their work, Lim and Cooper argue that the underlying alignment aim within the hedging strategy is a crucial factor in deciding the success of the strategy itself. According to the authors, there are four main types of alignment pursued by smaller states. First, smaller power might take a non-aligned position whereby they explicitly avoid taking sides. Second, a smaller power may take dual-aligned position whereby

⁶⁴ Ibid, 6.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 6.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 8.

⁶⁸ Nicholas Ross Smith, "When Hedging Goes Wrong: Lessons from Ukraine's Failed Hedge of the EU and Russia", *Global Policy* vol. 11, (2020): 541-649.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 544.

they can aim to align with both sides. Third, a smaller power may pursue an asymmetrical alignment whereby they aim to align with one side more while also maintaining cordial relations with the other. Fourth, a smaller power may undertake a wedging strategy to play off the larger powers against one another with the aim of aligning with the highest bidder.

The review of the above-mentioned representative literature illustrates that the studies of hedging mainly has five concerns:

- 1) First, why states hedge? Almost all the studies take the rise of China as the context.
- 2) Second, what to hedge against? Most authors argue it is the threat produced by China's rise, such as Goh, stating that a rising China is greatest threat itself that needs to be hedge against. However, the main overarching impetus to adopt a hedging strategy is to respond to uncertainty of the world order.
- 3) Third, how to hedge? This aspect is where the most significant divergences exist in the current academic literature on hedging. Most studies design a set of strategies which are to be combined depending on a particular situation at hand, while some argue that hedging is conducted through a single type of behavior.
- 4) Fourth, under what conditions hedging is conducted? Most studies rather ignore this specific point, and merely provide a few mentions relating to this in passing.
- 5) Fifth, hedging works? This is a crucial point, but the current literature does not underscore it sufficiently.

In fact, under a closer inspection, one could state that hedging-related studies simply proclaim that the subjects of their research had employed hedging strategy and do not adequately explain the specifics, leaving out the inner-workings of the hedging mechanism as supposedly self-evident, and thus fail to provide a convincing answer to the main question – whether the threats are lessened or eliminated if the hedging strategy is conducted. The prevailing logic seems to be based on the following premises: because it is the nature of powers to expand⁷⁰, a rising China is viewed as a threat by the majority of secondary or smaller countries, particularly in the East Asia⁷¹. However, a complex interdependence has developed between these countries and China; therefore, while they enjoy the economic and trade ties with China, they also maintain security cooperation with the U.S.⁷² In this process, some authors suggest that hedging involves the task of taming China into accepting the status quo of international order, while others claim that hedging is about biding one's time to make a

⁷⁰ Wight, 1978, p. 144.

⁷¹ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective", *China International Strategy Review*, vol.3, (2001)300–315.

⁷² *Ibid.*

choice⁷³ but they all tend to assume that once China becomes aggressive, these countries will retreat to the US for security. Therefore, such conclusion is rather preconceived, and conceptually, it is about bandwagoning with the established power — the US, not balancing against the rising power — China.

Similarly to the smaller states of East Asia, amidst the intensifying rivalry between the United States, China, and Russia, Ukraine has been strategically positioned to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape in Eastern Europe. Recognizing the shifting dynamics and power struggles among these major global players, Ukraine has adopted Lim and Cooper's conceptualization of hedging, particularly their notion of wedging strategy which allows Ukraine to engage with all sides simultaneously (except for Russia) to mitigate risks associated with the potential tectonic structural shifts. Moreover, Ukraine aims to navigate this great power rivalry by exploiting the ongoing competition for its national interest, instead of risking to accidentally choose the wrong side. The dual-aligned hedging strategy differs from balancing and bandwagoning which would require Ukraine to adopt a single-sided hedging strategy. This multi-aligned hedging adopted by Ukraine demonstrates how it seeks to maintain diplomatic flexibility to capitalize on the economic and security benefits offered by each player (except by Russia) while also minimizing its vulnerability to geopolitical coercion or dominance.

3. Methodology

The research methodology involves a qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources to delve into dynamics of Ukraine-China bilateral relations. Primary source analysis encompasses scrutinizing speeches, official statements, and interviews conducted with governmental officials from both Ukraine and China, complemented by a review of official governmental documents relating to the bilateral relations. These primary sources were accessed through governmental websites using specific search parameters denoting the Ukraine-China nexus, in English, Ukrainian, or Chinese languages as appropriate.

Moreover, a comprehensive examination of secondary sources will be conducted, including academic papers and articles from prominent and reliable media outlets. Furthermore, a significant portion of the analysis will rely on original primary data collected by the author through the conducting of semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian sinologists, international relations experts, academics, professors, diplomats, and politicians. The interviews provided significant insights into the underlying motivations and strategic calculations of the Ukrainian government following the Russian aggression. These sources enrich the analysis with an in-depth exploration of Ukraine's

⁷³ Ibid.

foreign policy considerations, shedding light on how evolving Ukraine-China bilateral relations are perceived from the Ukrainian perspective and revealing the complexities inherent in Ukraine's diplomatic endeavors.

It is important to note the potential limitations inherent in the proposed research, primarily reliant on qualitative sources. However, the concern for the prospect of the author's subjectivity affecting the reliability of the insights and conclusions drawn, has been addressed through a concerted effort to base the analysis on a diverse and divergent array of source selection. Furthermore, the exploration of the novel topic at hand, specifically the Ukrainian hedging strategies towards the U.S and China amidst Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, encounters the inevitable obstacle of sparse literature. Nevertheless, instead than viewing the prevalence of qualitative sources and the scarcity of academic research as limitations, these aspects should rather be perceived as affirmations of the significance of this thesis. The presented analysis should serve as a catalyst for further inquiry, urging the pursuit of additional quantitative studies to delve deeper into the complexities raised.

4. Analysis of Ukraine-China relations in the aftermath of the war

The aim of this section is to explore the political, diplomatic, and economic relations between Ukraine and China following the 2022 invasion by Russia. The first sub-section will delve into China's response to the war in Ukraine and its ramifications for the bilateral ties between Beijing and Kyiv. The second sub-section will assess the trade dynamics between Ukraine and China, as well as the potential contribution of China in the post-war reconstruction efforts in Ukraine.

4.1. War in Ukraine: Unveiling the Impact on bilateral relations

Prior to Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022, Sino-Ukrainian political and economic engagements have been largely influenced by domestic factors, such as the political instability or the so-called 'colour revolutions' color in Ukraine which prompted periods of downturns. Nevertheless, Kyiv and Beijing have consistently sought to forge a resilient partnership, particularly in the economic sphere. However, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Sino-Ukrainian relations have been significantly impacted by the external factor- Russia's war, which became a critical determinant on the bilateral relationship between the two states. To understand the extent of the impact, it is imperative to examine China's response to the war in Ukraine.

China's stance has often been viewed as leaning towards pro-Russian "neutrality". Beijing has refrained from directly condemning Russia's aggression in Ukraine, by opting to instead attribute the

blame to NATO expansionism and ‘Cold War mentality’⁷⁴. Despite declaring to hold a neutral position, China has been strengthening its relations with Russia while showing reluctance to engage with the Ukrainian government on a more significant level. Notwithstanding persistent efforts by the Ukrainians, led by President V. Zelenskyy⁷⁵, to establish a direct dialogue with Beijing, China has shown reluctance to engage throughout the first year of the war. Diplomatic exchanges were primarily limited to the interactions between the respective foreign ministers. These exchanges included two phone conversations⁷⁶ and one meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly⁷⁷. During these discussions, Ukraine expressed appreciation for China's involvement, affirming readiness to enhance communication and anticipating China's mediation efforts in achieving a ceasefire. Moreover, Ukraine's foreign minister D. Kuleba characterized China as: ‘a key positive force for maintaining peace’⁷⁸, highlighting its Ukrainian-perceived significance in maintaining stability. Conversely, although the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi reiterated China's respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity, he more significantly also reaffirmed China's understanding stance regarding Russia's "legitimate security concerns"⁷⁹. The meeting between the two ministers on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in 2022, produced similar outcome. During the exchange between D. Kuleba and Wang Yi, the latter reaffirmed China's commitment to peace through immediate negotiations. In response, the Ukrainian foreign minister reiterated the significance of China's global standing and urged China to take an active role in resolving the ongoing crisis. He also emphasized Ukraine's readiness to improve bilateral exchanges and cooperation with China in various fields. Diplomatic ties between the two nations, as described by Maksym Skrypchenko, President of Transatlantic Dialogue Center, were in a state of "diplomatic stalemate"⁸⁰.

4.2. China's evolving position – peace initiatives

A year into the war in Ukraine, there was a noticeable shift in China's stance. Beijing announced a peace proposal for Ukraine: “China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis” in which it repeated familiar talking points about Beijing's support for the UN Charter and Ukraine's territorial integrity. It also highlighted the supposed disregard by the West for ‘Russia's legitimate

⁷⁴ Iliya Kusa, “China's Strategic Calculations in the Russia-Ukraine War”, Wilson Center, viewed on 2024 April 2nd, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/chinas-strategic-calculations-russia-ukraine-war>

⁷⁵ Jenni Marsh, “Zelensky Seeks Direct Talks With Xi Amid War With Russia”, Time. Viewed on 2024 April 6th, <https://time.com/6203530/zelensky-xi-talks/>

⁷⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China, “Wang Yi Speaks with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on the Phone”, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220302_10646982.html

⁷⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China, “Wang Yi Meets with Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba of Ukraine”, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202209/t20220924_10770931.html

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Maksym Skrypchenko, interview by author, Zoom call, 2024 March 20th

security concerns’ – quickly earning Chinese proposal a pro-Russian label. Beijing’s proposal has received widespread criticism amongst Ukraine’s key allies, who wrote off the Chinese proposal as only serving the Kremlin’s agenda. However, President Zelenskyy expressed openness to China’s peace plan and indicated a willingness to consider some aspects of the proposal, suggesting that it could be useful for both countries and global security⁸¹. In fact, the Ukrainian President called peace plan as ‘important signal⁸²’. Moreover, the announcement of the Chinese proposal was followed by a long-anticipated phone call between President Zelenskyy and Xi Jinping which Zelenskyy described as an important opportunity to give new impetus to Ukrainian-Sino relations⁸³. Xi Jinping used the occasion to announce China’s intentions to dispatch a Special Envoy, Li Hui, to negotiate a settlement for the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, highlighting China’s evolving position on the matter. After consultations, both President Zelensky and Foreign minister Kuleba praised China’s mediating role and underscored Ukraine’s openness to China’s involvement⁸⁴. In addition, China extended its “mediating” role by sending a Special Envoy to join leaders in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, for the “Peace Summit” initiated by President Zelesnkyy, aimed at restoring peace in Ukraine. This marked the first instance of Chinese official ‘s presence among the four Peace Summits held thus far. China has also expressed intentions to participate in the fifth Peace Summit to be held in June 2024 in Switzerland⁸⁵. FM Kuleba described Chinese participation as a “breakthrough⁸⁶“, once again signaling Ukraine’s responsiveness to prospect of Beijing’s evolving position. Chinese proactive role generated optimism in Kyiv, suggesting the potential for improving bilateral relations, including the restoration of communication channels. Members of the Ukrainian Sinologists Association, Vita Golod, chair of the board of the Ukrainian Association and Dmytro Yefremov, explain that Ukrainian government welcomed Chinese peace proposal because they were trying to keep communication channels with China open, which has been difficult since the outbreak of the war⁸⁷. Sinologist Dmytro Burtsev echoes similar message, highlighting the importance of Chinese leadership’s engagement in the

⁸¹ Jones Hayden, “Zelenskyy open to considering some parts of Beijing’s proposals to end Ukraine war”, Politico, viewed on 2024 March 14th, <https://www.politico.eu/article/volodymyr-zelenskyy-open-consider-parts-beijing-proposal-end-ukraine-war-xi-jinping-china/> .

⁸² Stuart Lau, Veronika Melkozerova, “Xi tells Zelenskyy: China won’t add ‘fuel to the fire’ in Ukraine”, Politico, viewed on 2024 April 9th, <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-xi-jinping-volodymyr-zelenskyy-ukraine-finally-called-zelenskyy-first-since-russia-waged-war/> .

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Agence France-Presse, “Ukraine tells China envoy it will not give up territory to Russia as price for peace”, The Guardian, viewed on 2024 April 9th, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/18/ukraine-tells-china-envoy-it-will-not-give-up-territory-to-russia-as-price-of-peace> .

⁸⁵ Swiss Info, “China is considering taking part in the Ukraine peace conference”, viewed on 2024 April 10th, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/foreign-affairs/china-does-not-rule-out-participation-in-ukraine-conference/73858049>

⁸⁶ Ukrainska Pravda, “Kuleba believes China’s participation in meeting on Ukrainian peace formula is major breakthrough”, viewed on 2024 April 2nd, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/08/4/7414251/>

⁸⁷ Dmytro Yefremov, interview by author, Zoom call, 2024 February 29th

⁸⁸ Vita Golod, interview by author, Zoom call, 2024 February 16th

Ukrainian crisis, especially since the first year of the war was marked by avoidance to conduct the bilateral dialogue⁸⁹.

5. Ukrainian-Sino Economic relations

The following sub-sections delve into Ukraine-China trade relations in the aftermath of the war. Examining the importance of economic ties between these two countries. Additionally, an examination of China's expressed readiness to participate in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction efforts is provided.

5.1. Trade

Despite the deterioration in bilateral relations between Ukraine and China, marked by limited political engagement and China's alignment with Russia, trade relations between the two nations have remained a significant aspect of their cooperation. Before the outbreak of the war in 2022, Ukraine-China trade relations were at the peak, marked by significant trade volumes that soared to unprecedented levels. In 2019, China emerged as Ukraine's largest trading partner, surpassing Russia⁹⁰. For China, Ukraine's strategic location, often described as "getaway to Europe"⁹¹ as well as Ukraine's free trade agreement (FTA) which it has with the EU since 2014⁹², make Ukraine's participation in BRI very attractive and beneficial for PRC. In July of 2021, less than a year prior to the invasion, an agreement between Ukraine and China were signed to further boost cooperation on infrastructure which was followed by Zelenskyy's and Xi phone call during which Zelenskyy reassured Xi that Ukraine could become China's bridge to Europe. This finally moved Ukraine's participation in BRI from declarative to substantial. In an interview, Oleksandr Merezhko, the head of the Ukrainian parliament's foreign policy committee, explains that before Russia's invasion, Ukraine stood to receive additional \$4 billion of Chinese investments into Ukraine's Big Construction Program⁹³, which was launched by President Zelenskyy in 2020. Merezhko emphasize the importance of this sum to improve Ukraine's infrastructure and create jobs. However, he emphasizes that since the outbreak of the war, Chinese are not discussing any investments in Ukraine's infrastructure.

Nevertheless, trade between two countries remained relatively robust. Ukraine experienced a decline in overall exports, attributed to disturbed supply chains and closure of the Odessa port, which

⁸⁹ Dmytro Burtsev, interview by author, Zoom call, 2024 March 7th

⁹⁰ Natalia Datskevych, "It's official: China is Ukraine's largest trading partner", Kyiv Post, viewed on 2024 March 1st, <https://archive.kyivpost.com/business/its-official-china-is-ukraines-largest-trading-partner.html>

⁹¹ Ruslan Bortnik, "China's Growing Role in Ukraine: Players and Trends", Ukrainian Institute of Politics, viewed on 2024 March 27th, <https://uiamp.org/usilenie-rolu-kitaya-v-ukraine-igroki-i-tendencii>

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Oleksandr Merezhko, interview by author, Vilnius, 2024 March 22nd

significantly reduced Ukraine's exports of grains, iron, and steel, commodities it had previously sold to China in substantial quantities. As a result, in 2022 Ukrainian exports to China declined by 71%, amounting to 800,000 tons⁹⁴. However, upon the reopening of the Odessa port in 2023, China again emerged as the primary destination for Ukraine's grain exports. Within a few months, Ukraine successfully exported nearly 15 million tons of cargo, with approximately 33% of this volume directed toward the Chinese market. Moreover, trade picked up and reached nearly pre-war levels with total trade between two nations reaching \$10.4 billion in 2023⁹⁵. Maksym Skrypchenko underscores the pivotal role of Ukraine's grain exports to China, emphasizing it as a cornerstone of their trade relations. He highlights that approximately one-third of the containers passing through the grain corridor ultimately reach China. Skrypchenko argues that Ukraine's ability to continue delivering grains to China despite the challenges posed by war and Russian threats serve as a testament to Ukraine's reliability as a trade partner for China. Skrypchenko argues that this achievement aligns with the primary objective of the Ukrainian government, demonstrating to China resilience and commitment even amidst a full-scale invasion. Despite the necessity of offering grains to China at discounted rates, Skrypchenko contends that the benefits far outweigh the costs, emphasizing the strategic importance of maintaining this trade relationship. He underscores the importance, of this: China has never perceived Ukraine as an independent entity.

Beijing always looked at Ukraine as either part of Russia's sphere of influence or a part of Western coalition. Skrypchenko emphasizes that Ukraine tried to break this system by showing to China that it can make decisions independently but then he reminds of Motor Schi case. Ukraine had a chance to make an independent decision but gave in into U.S pressure. It was perceived by Chinese as a both a betrayal and a sign that Ukraine is not a country that they can fully trust. Therefore, the fact that Ukraine, despite Russia's aggression and full-scale war manages to continue their shipments to China in such large capacity, serves to China as a strong signal that Ukraine is capable and can be trusted⁹⁶. Several experts also underscore the pivotal role of trade between Ukraine and China, identifying it as a key priority for the Ukrainian government. Several indicators support this line of argument. Deputy Minister of Economy of Ukraine, Taras Kachka, notably became the first and only Ukrainian official to visit China following the onset of the Russian invasion⁹⁷. During this visit, he engaged in discussions with China's vice commerce minister. According to both Chinese and Ukrainian media

⁹⁴ Yuriy Grigorenko, "Ukraine – China: balance in iron and steel trade", GMK Center, viewed on 2024 March 10th, <https://gmk.center/en/posts/ukraine-china-balance-in-iron-and-steel-trade/>

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Maksym Skrypchenko, interview with author, Google Meet Call, 2024 March 20th

⁹⁷ Martin Quin Pollard, "Ukraine official makes first senior visit to China since before Russian invasion", Reuters, viewed on 2024 April 8th, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/ukraine-official-makes-first-senior-visit-china-since-before-russian-invasion-2023-07-20/>

reports, the primary agenda of the meeting was to explore avenues for enhancing exports. The Chinese readout of the meeting highlighted China's willingness to "establish cooperative relations between the investment promotion agencies of the two countries, and continuously expand the space for trade and investment cooperation." Simultaneously, Ukraine declared its commitment to collaborate with China in advancing the healthy and sustainable development of economic and trade relations between the two nations.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Ukraine remained without an ambassador to China for the initial 16 months of the conflict. This prolonged vacancy arose following the unexpected passing of the previous ambassador due to a heart attack in 2021. The delay in appointing a new ambassador raises questions regarding the status of Ukrainian-Sino diplomatic relations, as it left a significant gap in diplomatic representation. According to Burtsev, the complexity of the ambassadorial appointment process aside, the key factor is China's agreement with the candidate. "Diplomacy is all about symbols and gestures and Chinese people are very symbolic people⁹⁸". Thus Burtsev argues that the prolonged delay indicates China's reluctance to approve the chosen candidate and thus serves as a strong symbol of current Ukraine-China relations. Associate Professor Dmytro Yefremov does not link the prolonged absence of a Ukrainian ambassador in Beijing with the current state of Ukraine-China relations. During the interview, he explained that the delay in appointing a new ambassador stemmed from Ukraine's aspiration to nominate an individual with significant influence and extensive connections in Ukraine, aimed at improving diplomatic but most importantly economic relations between the two nations. According to Yefremov, this rationale explains the appointment of Pavlo Riabikin, a seasoned professional with extensive experience in the transport and infrastructure sectors⁹⁹.

5.2. Exploring China's Potential Role in Ukraine's Reconstruction: Opportunities and Challenges

According to World Bank estimates, Ukraine's post-war recovery could cost nearly \$486 billion¹⁰⁰, while Ukraine itself predicts a figure closer to \$750 billion¹⁰¹, a number that may still rise given the ongoing conflict. However, irrespective of the exact figure, it seems implausible for any single entity to invest such an enormous amount. China's twelve-point peace plan, particularly its final point, underscores Beijing's intention not to remain passive in this regard. Helping to rebuild Ukraine would

⁹⁸ Dmytro Burtsev, interview with author, Zoom call, 2024 March 7th

⁹⁹ Dmytro Yefremov, interview with author, Zoom call, 2024 February 29th

¹⁰⁰ Andrea Shalal, "Ukraine needs \$486 bln to recover, rebuild after nearly two years of war – World Bank", Reuters, viewed on 2024 April 8th, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-needs-486-bln-recover-rebuild-after-nearly-two-years-war-world-bank-2024-02-15/>

¹⁰¹ Reuters, "Ukraine sees post-war reconstruction cost nearing 750 billion – PM", viewed on 2024 April 9th, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-sees-post-war-reconstruction-costs-nearing-750-billion-pm-2022-10-24/>

give China a chance to increase its economic and political influence in the second largest European country. Moreover, in Chinese BRI plans, Ukraine is perceived as one of the options for connecting Asia and Europe. Ukraine's official position on Chinese involvement in reconstruction process thus far has been welcoming. President Zelenskyy in his interview with South China Morning Post stated that: 'he wants stronger ties with China and help rebuilding his war-torn country '. A year later, in the address to the Australian National University, Zelenskyy reiterated the message: "I would like China to participate in the rebuilding of all Ukraine," . He stressed that Ukraine's rebuilding is going to be a huge undertaking adding: 'I would like China and the Chinese business to join in the rebuilding process, and the Chinese state to join this,' Zelenskyy's desire for stronger ties with China extends beyond the context of the war. His invitation for China's participation in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction process underscores Ukraine's earnest intention to involve China not only in mediation efforts during the conflict but also in post-war scenarios.

However, expert opinions on Chinese involvement vary significantly. Some advocate for cautious engagement with China, citing concerns over the risks associated with large investments from Chinese state-owned companies and potential dependency on China. Conversely, others caution against the potential loss of Western support and highlight the risk of jeopardizing Ukraine's ties with the U.S if significant Chinese involvement occurs.

6. Great Power Competition

Since the end of World War II, the United States has established and maintained an international world order, commonly referred to as Pax Americana¹⁰². This term signifies the United States' significant power and influence in shaping global events. However, this dominance has been gradually waning, evident in the rise of China and Russia's aspirations to challenge the U.S. hegemony. Russia's war against Ukraine and Washington's inability to stop the Russian aggression presents an opportunity for China, a major rival of the U.S., to assert itself as a superpower capable of proposing a new global order or at least to bend the current structure to position itself as the leading actor on the international arena. Beijing claims the current global order is outdated¹⁰³ and that the U.S hegemony needs to be replaced by multi-polar order¹⁰⁴, while in practice trying to establish its own

¹⁰² Christopher Layne, „The End of Pax Americana: How Western Decline Became Inevitable“, The Atlantic, viewed on 2024 May 10th, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/04/the-end-of-pax-americana-how-western-decline-became-inevitable/256388/>

¹⁰³ Michael Schuman, „Xi Jinping Is Done With the Established World Order“, The Atlantic, viewed on 2024 May 10th, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/09/g20-summit-china-xi-absence/675267/>

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

supremacy. The war in Ukraine has accelerated this contentious trend and created a space for great powers to expand their dominance and pursue their strategic interests. For the U.S, supporting Ukraine amidst Russian aggression serves as a testament to its commitment to secure and protect U.S.-led liberal order. For Russia, the war against Ukraine is a chance to maintain its declining great power status. For China, which has emerged from its “century of humiliation¹⁰⁵”, the war presents an opportunity to consolidate its role as a “responsible global power” whose involvement would be understood as necessary to resolve any significant conflict on the international stage – a role that for the past eight decades has been exclusively reserved for the U.S. Therefore, the global powers perceive the war in Ukraine primarily through the perspective of a proxy for their competition and rivalry, leaving Ukraine in great uncertainty and chaos.

Hence, to grasp the dynamics of Ukrainian-Sino relations, it is essential to analyze them within the context of a broader U.S-China, China-Russia, and US-Russia rivalry. In the upcoming sections, we will examine how Ukraine strategically leverages the rivalry among these states to its advantage. Confronted with great power competition, Ukraine remains committed to its aspirations to join Western alliance yet the structural change in the international arena creates state of flux in which Ukraine decides to adopt the hedging strategy, and the optimal wedging sub-strategy in particular. Thus, Ukraine manages to safeguard its interest and maintain flexibility in the times of such unprecedented instability.

6.1. United States vs Russia – Never-ending Diplomatic game

Relations between Washington and Moscow have been marked by periods of cooperation, competition, and strong opposition to each other, reflecting the complex dynamics between the two global powers with different interests and ideologies.

Following the Cold War, the United States’ influence in former Soviet Union states progressively expanded, encouraging their alignment with the U.S.-led liberal world order and distancing from Russia's sphere of influence. The U.S has pursued normative, economic and security hegemon in Eastern and Central Europe, including Ukraine¹⁰⁶. Following the collapse of Soviet Union, Russia did not have enough power, or coherent foreign policy to oppose the American expansion of influence in the former Soviet Union states. While some of them have successfully aligned themselves with Western alliances backed by the U.S., such as the EU or NATO, Ukraine has historically pursued a

¹⁰⁵ Ivo Daalder, “Xi is fixated on ending China’s century of humiliation”, Politico, viewed on 2024 May 3rd, <https://www.politico.eu/article/xi-is-fixated-on-ending-chinas-century-of-humiliation/>

¹⁰⁶ Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, “Thirty Years of U.S. Policy Toward Russia: Can the Vicious Circle Be Broken?”, Carnegie endowment, viewed on 2024 May 2nd, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/04/thirty-years-of-us-policy-toward-russia-can-the-vicious-circle-be-broken?lang=en>

policy of multi-alignment hedge, attempting to accommodate constructive relations with the U.S., Russia and most recently - China¹⁰⁷. However, Ukraine's delicate balance between the West and Russia has failed when Ukraine pursued clear aspirations to join Western alliances and therefore significantly strained its relations with neighboring Moscow. Initially, Russia has exerted significant influence over Ukraine through a range of tactics, employing soft coercion which gradually escalated into assertive measures and eventually erupted into outright aggression and war. From Moscow's perspective, Ukraine is strategically vital and belongs within Russia's sphere of influence. Consequently, any efforts by the U.S. to draw Ukraine closer to Western alliances, such as NATO, are perceived as part of a broader strategy aimed at encircling and weakening Russia geopolitically. Simultaneously, the U.S. views Russia's opposition to Ukraine's legitimate and independent decisions to further democratize the country as an effort to safeguard Putin's authoritarian ambitions. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, a region of Ukraine, following a controversial referendum widely criticized as illegitimate by the international community. This move was a significant violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and sparked widespread condemnation from Western nations, including the United States. This dynamic has engendered a cycle of mutual mistrust and complexity in U.S.-Russia relations. Outgoing struggle between these two states has manifested through their confrontation in Ukraine.

For Russia, Ukraine serves as a proxy in its efforts to maintain its declining status as a global superpower. With the U.S. foreign policy is increasingly focused on the Indo-Pacific region, Russia aimed to seize perceived opportunity to exploit Washington's shifting priorities and withdrawal from Europe¹⁰⁸. Such calculation has led Russia to initiate a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, while Russia hoping that the U.S. will be too preoccupied with the competition in the South China Sea to provide full support to Ukraine. However, Russia's aggression has also been widely argued to pose the greatest challenge to the U.S.-led global order in eight decades¹⁰⁹. Thus, defending Ukraine is interpreted as a way to reinforce the credibility of the U.S. security guarantees and commitments to its allies worldwide¹¹⁰. Conversely, American failure to support Ukraine could undermine trust in the U.S. leadership and deterrence capabilities, potentially leading to an increased aggression from

¹⁰⁷ Nataliya Butyrka, "Ukraine's Futile Struggle to Win China's Support over the Russian Aggression", China Observers, viewed on 2024 February 27th, <https://chinaobservers.eu/ukraines-futile-struggle-to-win-chinas-support-over-the-russian-aggression/>

¹⁰⁸ Michael Hirsh, "The Biden Administration Is Quietly Shifting Its Strategy in Ukraine", Politico, viewed on 2024 May 1st, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/12/27/biden-endgame-ukraine-00133211>

¹⁰⁹ Drew Cottle, Angela Keys, Thomas Costigan, "Contemporary Challenges to the U.S.-led Liberal International Order from the United States and the Rising Powers of China and Russia", *The Fate of the Liberal International Order and Rising Powers*, vol. 6, (2022):57-75, <https://rpquarterly.kureselcalismalar.com/quarterly/contemporary-challenges-to-the-u-s-led-liberal-international-order-from-the-united-states-and-the-rising-powers-of-china-and-russia/>

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

adversaries in other regions. Therefore, policymakers in Washington have agreed on five aid packages, providing Ukraine with \$175 billion since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022¹¹¹. And although this aid has played a pivotal role in Ukraine's defense against Russian aggression, Washington's support has not been without hesitations. Since the outbreak of the war, Putin has effectively employed a strategy of nuclear blackmail¹¹². Initially, Moscow cautioned the West against providing any military artillery supplies to Ukraine, issuing veiled threats of nuclear escalation, which in turn introduce a level of uncertainty in Washington. Marion Messmer, senior researcher at Chatman House explains that when states worry about adversaries, they are aiming for a strike just below the red line¹¹³. Consequently, Russia's nuclear posturing vis-à-vis the U.S. is designed to maintain a heightened sense of uncertainty, compelling American policymakers to factor in the potential consequences of nuclear escalation. This strategy effectively deters the U.S. from providing Ukraine with long-range missiles and admonishes Ukraine against targeting Russian assets, all while withholding explicit commitments regarding Ukraine's NATO aspirations¹¹⁴. And although these Russian threats lack credibility, each phase of U.S. support for Ukraine has been characterized by hesitancy and delay. This indecisiveness by the U.S. to provide Ukraine with a clear strategy which could bring about a clear progress in solving the war, – creates a significant lack of confidence in Kiev. Consequently, Ukraine finds itself unable to perceive the U.S. as a sole dominant power it can depend on. Washington's strategy which stems from the fear of further escalation with Russia, without explicitly aiming to defeat the Kremlin, stands in stark contrast to Ukraine's approach, which is focused on overpowering Russia and reclaiming control of its occupied territories. Ultimately, the fear of nuclear escalation adds a layer of complexity to the U.S. decision-making on the timing and the extent of support provided to Ukraine, while also shaping the broader approach, or lack thereof, towards managing the conflict with Russia.

Back in 2008, Ukraine received similar declarations about its future in the NATO alliance; however, policymakers in Washinton refrained from providing Ukraine with a clear roadmap to its

¹¹¹ Jonathan Masters, Will Merrow, “How Much U.S. Aid Is Going to Ukraine?”, viewed on 2024 May 11th, <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-us-aid-going-ukraine> .

¹¹² Yehor Valiarenko, Oleksandra Romanova, “Nuclear Blackmail of the Russian Federation”, Ukrainian Prism, viewed on 2024 May 5th, <https://prismua.org/en/english-nuclear-blackmail-of-the-russian-federation/> .

¹¹³ Olivia Yanchik, “Putin’s Russia must not be allowed to normalize nuclear blackmail”, Atlantic Council, reviewed on 2024 May 5th, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-russia-must-not-be-allowed-to-normalize-nuclear-blackmail/> .

¹¹⁴ Yehor Valiarenko, Oleksandra Romanova, “Nuclear Blackmail of the Russian Federation”, Ukrainian Prism, viewed on 2024 May 5th, <https://prismua.org/en/english-nuclear-blackmail-of-the-russian-federation/> .

accession¹¹⁵. This cautious approach stemmed from the desire to avoid further escalation with Russia, counting on Ukraine's "neutral status" as optimal for both Washington and Moscow. However, as the following events have clearly demonstrated, Russia has only perceived these efforts of "de-escalation" as a permission to further escalate the situation towards a full re-establishment of its dominant influence in Ukraine. Moreover, the ambiguity of Washington's support amidst the fear of antagonizing Russia and intensifying rivalry with China has not only highlighted the lack of U.S. leadership but also signified the end of Pax Americana¹¹⁶. Consequently, this only fueled more uncertainty in Kiev and shaped Ukraine's broader understanding that it needs to remain strategic in managing its foreign policy with multiple superpowers, instead of fully aligning with the U.S, as bandwagoning with it can no longer guarantee a state security. Closely observing American hesitancy, China has seized the opportunity to present its own peace proposals, calling against the further escalation, and aiming to assert itself the exclusive global actor which is able to present a solution acceptable to both sides, and the leading international power. In turn, Ukraine has welcomed Beijing's involvement as an alternative to its decreasing trust that full alignment with the U.S can guarantee Ukraine's security. For instance, in an interview with the Chinese media, the Ukraine's foreign minister stated: "We propose that China becomes one of the guarantors of Ukraine's security, this is a sign of our respect and trust in the People's Republic of China¹¹⁷". Meanwhile, as Washington focuses on "de-escalating" tensions with Russia, Ukraine's prospects for NATO membership remain uncertain due to strong opposition from Moscow¹¹⁸. Consequently, faced with growing pressures on the frontline, and the lack of confidence in the support of its key Western ally, Ukraine from the perspective of Ukraine it has been left with no other option than to pursue a dual-aligned hedging strategy and seek security assurances from China.

6.2. Pro-Russian or Pro-Chinese China?

While the bilateral relations between the US and Russia underscore a lack of full commitment to supporting Ukraine, which has prompted Kyiv to seek alternative partners like China, Ukrainian-Sino

¹¹⁵ Constanze Stelzenmuller, „Does the West's Ukraine policy need a reality check? A Brookings debate“, Brookings debate, viewed on 2024 April 29th, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/does-the-wests-ukraine-policy-need-a-reality-check-a-brookings-debate/> .

¹¹⁶ Christopher Layne, "The End of Pax Americana: How Western Decline Became Inevitable", The Atlantic, reviewed on 2024 5th May, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/04/the-end-of-pax-americana-how-western-decline-became-inevitable/256388/>

¹¹⁷ Vincent Ni, "Beijing orders 'stress test' as fears of Russia-style sanctions mount", The Guardian, viewed on 2024 April 10th, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/04/beijing-orders-stress-test-as-fears-of-russia-style-sanctions-mount>

¹¹⁸ Yehor Valiarenko, Oleksandra Romanova, "Nuclear Blackmail of the Russian Federation", Ukrainian Prism, viewed on 2024 May 5th, <https://prismua.org/en/english-nuclear-blackmail-of-the-russian-federation/> .

relations cannot also be understood outside Russia-China relations. The tendency is very clear – consolidation of China-Russia alignment which is driven by common perception of the United States as an adversary which needs to be challenged. However, Chinese strategy differs from Russia's, and this creates the space for Ukraine to exploit Beijing's special and ambiguous relations with Moscow.

Sino-Russian relations have undergone a significant transformation in recent years, historically evolving from stages of conflicts and competition to a strategic partnership characterized by multifaceted cooperation. The war in Ukraine has marked as a turning point in their relationship – bringing Moscow and Beijing to a closer cooperation, which in the past was marred with fierce strategic rivalry. The outbreak of the war in 2022 draw these two states to focus on their shared desire to challenge U.S hegemony. Russia's increasing isolation from the Western powers has induced it closer to seek China's approval and support¹¹⁹ amidst Western sanctions. China, in turn, has positioned itself as Russia's crucial ally, strongly opposing sanctions and providing Russia with the 'lifeline'¹²⁰. However, Beijing's support for Moscow may not solely stem from the wish to support Russia's brutal aggression in Ukraine but rather from China's own national interests, which are best served by ensuring that Russia does not suffer a defeat for the following reasons.

Firstly, President Xi Jinping is keen to maintain the status quo in Russia, particularly under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, explains Korolev. The close personal relationship between Xi and Putin forms the foundation of Sino-Russian relations, characterized by a strong rapport and mutual understanding¹²¹. For China, Putin's leadership signifies stability and predictability, qualities that are viewed as fundamental in Beijing¹²². Any potential regime change in Russia could introduce uncertainty and unpredictability, which China seeks to avoid as it fosters closer alignment with Russia, and on the Asian continent as a whole, as the previous stability ensured favorable conditions for China's growth. Secondly, as tensions escalate between the U.S and China, Russia is perceived by Beijing as a crucial ally that could offer support to China in the event of a direct confrontation with the U.S. While China traditionally adheres to a policy of non-alignment, the encourages Beijing to rethink this policy, and pursue an insurance policy of its own by expanding the network of its autocratic allies. Thirdly, economic considerations play a significant role in these dynamics. Oksana Ischuk explains that before the full-scale invasion in 2022, Europe was Russia's main trading partner, for instance, in 2021 Russia exported goods worth over 188 billion U.S. dollars to the EU-

¹¹⁹ Kelly Ng, Yi Ma, "How is China supporting Russia after it was sanctioned for Ukraine war?", BBC, viewed 2024 May 9th, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60571253> .

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Alexander Korolev, interview with author, Zoom Call, 2024 March 2nd.

¹²² Ibid.

27¹²³. However, the imposition of harsh sanctions in the aftermath of the invasion compelled Russia to turn to the Chinese market, deepening its reliance on China¹²⁴. Russia is perceived to be China's 'junior' subordinate partner, granting Beijing advantageous conditions to acquire raw materials at discounted rates¹²⁵ and fostering Russia's dependency on the Chinese market¹²⁶. Fourthly, Russia's war in Ukraine not only challenges the US-led global order as a whole, but more specifically for China - distracts U.S from Indo-Pacific region by propelling it to return to managing the security situation in Europe, leaving China with more maneuvering space to continue establishing its regional dominance.

Therefore, China does not want to see Russia's defeat because the war in Ukraine and stability in Kremlin aligns with all China's primary goals. However, it is essential to note that for the motives explained in the next section - Beijing does not actually aim for the Russian victory either.

6.3. "China has its own position"

The Chinese MFA in its press statements often emphasize that: "China has its own position"¹²⁷ - this declaration perfectly captures Beijing's ambiguous stance on the war in Ukraine. On the one hand, China seemingly supports Russia, albeit tacitly. On the other hand, it has also refrained from taking a definitive side in the conflict and directly supporting Russia as it the strategic ambiguity is seen to better align with Beijing's interests.

According to Alexander Korolev, China's primary goal is to establish itself as a world superpower which can dominate and lead¹²⁸. And whilst Sino-Russian partnership is based on their common adversary, - the U.S., their particular strategies confronting the American hegemony and the current international world order vary significantly. Russia is often characterized as a "rogue state"¹²⁹, whereas China's strategic maneuvers tend to be more calculated. Beijing does not wish to impair its relationship with the U.S drastically and rather seeks to distance itself more gradually because it still

¹²³ Maxim Chupilkin, Beata Javorcik, and Alexander Plekhanov. "The Eurasian roundabout: Trade flows into Russia through the Caucasus and Central Asia." (2023).

¹²⁴ Kelly Ng, Yi Ma, "How is China supporting Russia after it was sanctioned for Ukraine war?", BBC, viewed 2024 May 9th, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60571253> .

¹²⁵ Volodymyr Golovko, „China and Russia War against Ukraine“, Ukrinform, viewed on 2024 March 12th, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-world/3733976-kitaj-ta-rosijska-vijna-proti-ukraini-dinamika-cervna-2023.html>

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Stefan Wolff, „China's new world order: looking for clues from Xi's recent meetings with foreign leaders“, The conversation, viewed on 2024 May 5th, <https://theconversation.com/chinas-new-world-order-looking-for-clues-from-xis-recent-meetings-with-foreign-leaders-227927> .

¹²⁸ Alexander Korolev, interview with author, MS Teams Call, 2024 March 7

¹²⁹ Eugene Rumer, „Rogue Power: Russia's Wartime Foreign Policy“, Carnegie Endowment, viewed on 2024 May 10th, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/05/rogue-power-russias-wartime-foreign-policy?lang=en>

needs both the U.S and its key partners for its economic growth and innovation¹³⁰. Since has mostly chosen not to develop new technologies on its own, but instead to exploit Western know-how, it recognizes that its economic prosperity and technological advancement are heavily reliant on its relations with the West. Proclaiming unequivocal support for Russia could jeopardize China's access to Western markets, finance, and technology – and therefore it is not worth to risk its own wealth, power, and its image as a responsible global power just to preserve Russia's standing. Whilst Moscow's challenge American hegemony aligns with Beijing's strategic interests, contrary to the view of some scholars, the Sino-Russian partnership is not in fact 'limitless'¹³¹". In other words, China does not need Russia as much as Russia needs China in its competition with the U.S. Instead, in parallel to clandestinely supporting Russia, China leverages the conflict in Ukraine by both spotlighting Russia's brutality, as well as underscoring the U.S. 'irresponsibility' citing Washington's gun supplies to Ukraine thus seeks to position itself as the sole peaceful and responsible global power.

Furthermore, as much as it is crucial for China to maintain cordial relations with the West is crucial for China to avoid sanctions and continue building a robust economy, it is equally vital for China to appear appealing to countries in the Global South¹³². Therefore, instead of fully backing Russia, Beijing has found itself compelled to aim for a mediator role, by presenting a twelve-point peace plan and participating in the Zelenskyy's Peace Summit¹³³. As a result, China established itself among the Global South as a peacemaker and advocate for global stability. This strategic stance would be challenging to maintain if China were to fully align itself with Russia, given the perceptions of Russia's assertive actions in various international arenas. Maksym Skrypchenko highlights the nuanced perspective of the Chinese, who do not view the world from the perspective of binary alliances, as it is often seen in Europe. China is open to cooperate, trade and communicate with all sides as long as it serves Beijing's interests¹³⁴. Therefore, several sinologists¹³⁵¹³⁶¹³⁷ refuse to characterize China's stance on the war in Ukraine as a "pro-Russian neutrality" and instead suggest labelling China as first and foremost "pro-Chinese". For Ukraine, faced with the declining leadership

¹³⁰ Seth Schindler, et. al, „The Second Cold War: US-China Competition for Centrality in Infrastructure, Digital, Production, and Finance Networks“, *Geopolitics*, vol. 1, (2023) 1-38, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14650045.2023.2253432> .

¹³¹ Patricia M. Kim, „The Limits of the No-Limits Partnership China and Russia Can't Be Split, but They Can Be Thwarted“, *Foreign Affairs*, viewed on 2024 May 6th, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/limits-of-a-no-limits-partnership-china-russia> .

¹³² Alexander Korolev, interview with author, Zoom Call, 2024 March 2nd .

¹³³ Juan N. García-Nieto, “Year Two: Appraising Chinese Foreign Policy Towards the War in Ukraine”, *China Observers*, viewed on 2024 March 27th, <https://chinaobservers.eu/year-two-appraising-chinese-foreign-policy-towards-the-war-in-ukraine/> .

¹³⁴ Maksym Skrypchenko, interview with author, Google Meet call, 2024 March 20th

¹³⁵ Evgeniia Gobova, interview with author, Zoom call, 2024 February 26th

¹³⁶ Vita Golod, interview with author, Zoom call, 2024 February 16th

¹³⁷ Maksym Skrypchenko, interview with author, Google Meet call, 2024 March 20th

of the U.S and its hesitancy to fully support Ukraine, China's engagement is perceived as a positive thing¹³⁸ due to the potential to strategically exploit China's desire to cultivate its global image as a responsible power. By accepting China's involvement in Peace initiatives, as argued by Dmytro Yefremov, the Ukrainian government is trying to engage in an extensive communication with Beijing, aiming to signal to Russia that its support from China may not be as steadfast as presumed¹³⁹. Communication with Chinese officials has been barely existent in the first year after Russia's invasion. However, Beijing has not sided with Moscow, and this creates an opportunity for officials in Kiev to open lines of communication with China. Yefremov believes that the existence of dialogue between China and Ukraine itself would serve as evidence of this¹⁴⁰. He further elaborates that his government understands the limitations of China's proposed peace initiatives in actually achieving peace¹⁴¹. However, Yefremov argues that if Ukraine were to fully align with the U.S and reject Beijing's peace initiatives, Kyiv would risk pushing China closer to Russia. It is the primary Ukrainian objective to prevent China's even closer alignment with Russia and to prevent China from extending direct support to Russia and to impede China from extending direct support to Russia, particularly in supplying lethal weaponry a scenario that would have completely detrimental consequences for Ukraine.

Moreover, despite concerted efforts by the Western nations to isolate Russia through sanctions, this strategy has largely proven ineffective due to the lack of support from China and many countries in the Global South. Additionally, the United States has had limited leverage over Russia, given the complexities of their relationship. However, China's perceived influence over Russia, as its subordinate partner, presents a different dynamic. Merezhko as well as sinologists Vita Golod and Dmytro Yefremov, suggest that policymakers in Kyiv genuinely believe that the Ukrainian government can attain China's support in pressuring Russia to end the war in Ukraine¹⁴². Skrypchenko argues that this explains why policymakers in Kyiv warmly welcome Chinese participation in its peace negotiation initiatives, stressing China's involvement as a "breakthrough" and signaling to China that its mediation efforts are appreciated¹⁴³. The author posits that a prevailing sentiment among the Kyiv's diplomats and politicians is that a direct meeting between Zelenskyy and Xi Jinping could persuade the latter to reconsider China's stance on the conflict and for this, Kyiv needs to

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Dmytro Yefremov, interview with author, Zoom Call, 2024 February 29th

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Oleksandr Merezhko, interview by author, Vilnius, 2024 March 22nd; Vita Golod, interview by author, Zoom call, 2024 February 16th.

¹⁴³ Maksym Skrypchenko, interview by author, Zoom call, 2024 March 20th

maintain cordial relations with Beijing¹⁴⁴.

Ultimately, Ukraine is resolute to exploit Beijing's ambiguous stance on the war and its unwillingness to directly side with Moscow. China's hesitation to proclaim alignment with Russia, due to the differences in their respective ultimate goals explained in the previous section, created space for the Ukrainian government to prevent even closer alignment between these two powers. In addition, it would be an oversimplification to suggest that China completely overlooks Ukraine's significance and does not have its own intentions for the war in Ukraine to end. On the contrary, before Russia's invasion, China viewed Ukraine's involvement in the BRI as pivotal for connecting China to Europe¹⁴⁵. If Russia would successfully occupy Ukraine, it would have significant ramifications for China's strategic ambitions, particularly concerning its plans to establish vital connections between China and Europe via Ukraine. Therefore, China would rather see the end of the war or for it to become a frozen conflict, allowing to return to the previous status quo and enabling the continuation of its infrastructure projects. Moreover, Ukraine is a major importer of agricultural products to China¹⁴⁶. Russia's invasion has interrupted food supplies to China and caused surging prices. Beijing is greatly interested in stability of food markets, given its large population and dependency on Ukraine's agricultural sector¹⁴⁷. Additionally, the conflict has disrupted neon exports from Ukraine, which are critical for China's semiconductor production — a cornerstone of its economy¹⁴⁸. Moreover, China aims to bolster its presence in Central and Eastern Europe, recognizing Ukraine's significance as the continent's second-largest economy and given Ukraine's access to the EU market. Thus, preserving functional Sino-Ukrainian relations aligns with China's broader strategic goals of expanding its economic influence, enhancing geopolitical leverage, and securing access to key resources and markets. In addition to its economic interests, China's twelve-point peace plan for resolving the Ukraine crisis includes proposals for active participation in the post-war reconstruction efforts. With EU countries expected to play a significant role as donors in this process, analysts like Vita Golod and Oksana Ischuk argue that China's involvement signals a desire to foster improved relations with EU nations¹⁴⁹. This strategic move not only serves China's economic agenda but also aims to cultivate diplomatic ties and enhances its global standing. As Vita Golod suggests: "This time,

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Hong Bo, „Implications of the Ukraine war for China: can China survive secondary sanctions?“, *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies*, vol. 21 (2023):311-322, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14765284.2022.2136933?_gl=1*11db5a1*_ga*MTM4MjI1MTg5Ni4xNzA3MDQ1NDYw*_ga_0HYE8YG0M6*MTcwNzA0NTQ2MS4xLjEuMTcwNzA0NTQ3NC4wLjAuMA..&_ga=2.54257576.1049026732.1707045460-1382251896.1707045460

¹⁴⁶ Olena Mykal, "Why China is interested in Ukraine." *The Diplomat* 10 (2016), p. 7.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Alicia García Herrero, and Haoxin Mu. "The War in Ukraine: Economic impact on Asia." *Economic Diplomacy* 1.1 (2023): 56-63.

¹⁴⁹ Oksana Ischuk, interview with author, Zoom Call, 2024, April 9th.

China understands that if it manages to do what the US failed to do, it will consolidate its influence in Europe. And China now really needs Europe”¹⁵⁰.

In conclusion, Chinese stance on the war in Ukraine is based on calculated maneuvers aimed at furthering China’s own geopolitical interests. While China refrains from directly supporting Russia, it strategically avoids taking a definitive side in the conflict to protect its vast economic and political interests. Beijing's primary objective is to establish itself as a global superpower, and it views the conflict in Ukraine as an opportunity to showcase its role as a mediator and advocate for global stability. Despite China's tactical support for Russia, its broader strategic goals diverge from Moscow's, creating a space for Ukraine to leverage China's evolving global position. Policymakers in Kyiv recognize the potential for China to pressure Russia into ending the war, and thus welcome the prospect of Chinese participation in the future peace negotiations. Maintaining cordial relations with China is crucial for Ukraine's efforts to withstand Russian aggression and prevent closer alignment between Moscow and Beijing. Moreover, China's strategic interests in Ukraine extend beyond the conflict, encompassing economic partnerships and regional influence. Therefore, while China's involvement in the war may be ambiguous, its impact on the situation in Ukraine and the broader region cannot be overlooked.

6.4. U.S-China Rivalry and Ukraine's Strategic Positioning

China sees Russia’s war in Ukraine as a crucial bulwark to challenge the US-led international order – a structure which contradicts Xi Jinping’s vision of a multipolar world¹⁵¹. Therefore, this has significant implications on the Ukrainian-Sino relations which cannot be understood outside of the US-China rivalry.

In the last 25 years, the dynamic between the US and China has undergone a profound transformation. Initially marked by cooperation, their relationship has evolved into one that is increasingly characterized as confrontation¹⁵². China’s economic growth and technological advancement have positioned China as a rising superpower, prompting a reevaluation of its role on the world stage. Central to this shift is China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which has been pursued as a comprehensive development strategy aimed at enhancing connectivity and fostering economic

¹⁵⁰ Veronika Melkozerova, “Call me anytime: Zelenskyy plays the long game with Xi Jinping”, Politico, viewed on 2024 February 28th, <https://www.politico.eu/article/volodymyr-zelenskyy-play-long-game-xi-jinping-ukraine-russia-war-china/>

¹⁵¹ Juan N. Garcia-Nieto, “Year Two: Appraising Chinese Foreign Policy Towards War in Ukraine”, China Observers, Viewed on 2024 March 10th, <https://chinaobservers.eu/year-two-appraising-chinese-foreign-policy-towards-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

¹⁵² Kai He, Huiyun Feng. “International order transition and US-China strategic competition in the indo pacific.” The Pacific Review 36.2 (2023): 234-260.

cooperation between the continents¹⁵³. Meanwhile, the US perceives BRI as a strategic maneuver to expand Chinese dominance, particularly in developing countries, and has called the Chinese investments as “debt-trap diplomacy¹⁵⁴”. Moreover, China has been more assertive in the South China Sea (SCS) with growing aggressiveness and military modernization in the Taiwan strait¹⁵⁵. The war in Ukraine has in parallel intensified the debate about a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan, an area which is strategically important to both the U.S and its allies¹⁵⁶. Therefore, policymakers in Washington observe China’s rise not as merely an economic but also as a strategic challenge aimed at eroding the US led-security architecture in the Western Pacific and beyond¹⁵⁷.

Simultaneously, in the last decade, Washington’s strategic priorities have shifted. While Europe was once the focal point, attention has now pivoted towards the Indo-Pacific region, as evidenced by the US Indo-Pacific strategy and initiatives such as AUKUS or QUAD¹⁵⁸. These initiatives are aimed at forging alliances with like-minded nations to counter China’s assertive actions in the SCS and to limit its attempt from becoming the regional hegemon in East Asia, which is also a part of the larger US strategy for competing strategically and managing relations with China on the global stage¹⁵⁹. On the contrary, from Beijing’s perspective, this is an encirclement tactic to contain China’s influence and military reach.

Regarding the potential of China’s ‘reunification’ of Taiwan by force, Washington strictly rejects any this prospect and maintains a position that in such a case, the US would come to Taiwan’s defense¹⁶⁰. On the other hand, China considers Taiwan an integral part of its territory and vehemently opposes any form of independence or external interference in its internal affairs. Therefore, tensions between the two great powers have escalated even further as the U.S has increased its military presence in the region and expanded its support for Taiwan, while China has in turn responded with assertive rhetoric and military maneuvers¹⁶¹. For the US, maintaining stability and security in the

¹⁵³ Zhexin Zhang. “The belt and road initiative: China’s new geopolitical strategy?”. *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 4.03 (2018): 327-343.

¹⁵⁴ Daniel Lindley, „Assesing China’s Motives: How Belt and Road Initiative Threatens US Intrests“, U.S Department of Defense, viewed on 2024 March 3rd, https://media.defense.gov/2022/Jul/31/2003046329/-1/-1/1/05%20LINDLEY_FEATURE.PDF.

¹⁵⁵ Lindsay Maizland, „Why China- Taiwan relations are so tense“, Council On Foreign Relations, viewed on 2024 May 10th, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-taiwan-relations-tension-us-policy-biden>.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Kishore Mahbubani, “Has China Won?: The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy”. New York: Hachette Book Group.

¹⁵⁸ Kai He, Huiyun Feng. “International order transition and US-China strategic competition in the indo pacific.” *The Pacific Review* 36.2 (2023): 234-260.

¹⁵⁹ Stephanie Christine Winkler, “Strategic Competition and US-China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 16, (2023):333-356.

¹⁶⁰ Jared M. McKinney Peter Harris, „Deterrence gap: Avoiding War in Taiwan Strait“, U.S Department of Defense, viewed on 2024 May 10th, https://media.defense.gov/2024/Jan/05/2003369263/-1/-1/0/20240105_MCKINNEY-HARRIS_DETERRENCEGAP_FINAL.PDF.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

Taiwan Strait is crucial not only because of its commitment to Taiwan's defense and support for its democracy¹⁶², but also and more importantly – because of Taiwan's strategic position, respective importance to China and the credibility issues that the US would face if it failed to support a longstanding ally.

Oleksandr Merezhko argues that whilst Russia's war against Ukraine is certainly significant, it rather pales in comparison to the larger geopolitical rivalry unfolding between China and the United States. He perceives the current rivalry as 'Team US against team China'¹⁶³. China's opposition to the US is echoed in its rhetoric on the war in Ukraine which has been relatively consistent, characterized by a few key messages, constantly reiterated since the start of Russian invasion of Ukraine: attribution of blame on NATO and the US hegemony, calling for a common security framework, critique of 'cold war mentality' and opposition to unilateral sanctions¹⁶⁴. Moreover, Chinese officials and diplomats have demonstrated reluctance to use terms like 'invasion' or 'war' when referring to the Russian aggression, instead, predominantly employing terms such as 'the Ukraine issue'¹⁶⁵. Chinese MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying has even argued that labeling the conflict as an 'invasion' reflects a double standard, claiming that the Western media avoided using the term to describe US military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq¹⁶⁶. According to Korolev, a senior lecturer at the University of New South Wales and sinologist Dmytro Burtsev, the Russian narrative of the war, with only small exceptions, is actually reproduced amongst all epistemic community of experts, social and political scientists, advisors and media experts to promote anti-US and anti-NATO narratives¹⁶⁷. Therefore, as evident in Chinese officials' statements, China's response to the war in Ukraine, has primary centered on opposition to the US rather than directly addressing Russia's invasion to Ukraine. This emphasis on anti-US sentiment underscores China's perception of the war as a proxy conflict, wherein China views the US as a central player leading Ukraine and attempting to influence the whole international community to contain China. As argued by Korolev, "it is clear that the Western pressure on China is not about China's position towards Russia", as the West does not equally pressure, for instance, India, or any other major powers from the Global South to support Ukraine, and yet such expectation is raised for China¹⁶⁸. From the Chinese perspective, this is understood as Western hypocrisy and clandestine ambitions to preserve

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Oleksandr Merezhko, interview with author, Vilnius, 2024 March 22nd.

¹⁶⁴ Simone McCarthy, "What China really means when it talks about NATO's eastward expansion", CNN, viewed on: 2024 March 2nd, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/23/china/china-ukraine-warning-us-asia-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html>

¹⁶⁵ Simone McCarthy, "What China really means when it talks about NATO's eastward expansion", CNN, viewed on: 2024 March 2nd, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/23/china/china-ukraine-warning-us-asia-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html>

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Alexander Korolev, interview with author, Zoom Call, 2024 March 2nd.

¹⁶⁸ Alexander Korolev, interview with author, Zoom Call, 2024 March 2nd.

US dominance¹⁶⁹. Therefore, when Chins seemingly ignored Washington's condemnation of China's neutrality as pro-Russian, accusations of providing aiding to Russia's war machine, and warnings against potential sanctions¹⁷⁰, it has done so because acceding to these demands would mean submission to US will, which Beijing finds unacceptable.

Hence, in this confrontation, China's stance on the war in Ukraine shifted, from passive observer to a "responsible global power¹⁷¹". This stems from China's willingness to demonstrate that the US is no longer capable to solve global problems. Instead, China seeks to demonstrate its own resolve and ability to lead the international community. And for this, China cannot remain on the sidelines – it must play, or at least be perceived as playing an active role in the conflict. Thus, China has intensified communication with Ukraine and promoted its involvement in peace negotiations¹⁷². Instead of condemning China's stance, policymakers in Kyiv have welcomed China's involvement, hoping it will strengthen support from Beijing, but perhaps more importantly – that it would demonstrate to the US that its reluctance to confront Russia and stop the war has led Kyiv to consider China's involvement as an alternative. And while for China, Ukraine is a secondary issue, Ukraine's acceptance of Beijing's proposals – serves as a tool for Beijing to further consolidate its dominance and an image of a global power on par with the US.

From the Ukrainian perspective, such Beijing's attempts are also beneficial because they give Ukraine leverage to hedge against China without severely compromising relations with the U.S as its key partner. Strong transatlantic ties and accession to NATO alliance remain Ukraine's key priorities. However, the continuity of U.S aid and the prospect of NATO accession looms increasingly uncertain¹⁷³. Significant rise of U.S policymakers advocating for a shift in focus towards the Indo-Pacific region¹⁷⁴, diverting attention and resources away from Ukraine is increasing concerns in Kyiv. This was most starkly evident in the prolonged delay of a crucial aid bill for Ukraine in the US Congress, which was stalled for months¹⁷⁵. However, Ukrainian officials understand that aid packages from the U.S are unlikely to stop all together, and hope that Washington continues to view the war in

¹⁶⁹ Alexander Korolev, interview with author, Zoom Call, 2024 March 2nd.

¹⁷⁰ Austin Ramzy, „Russia and China Double Down on Defying U.S“, The Wall Street Journal, viewed on 2024 April 11th, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-and-china-double-down-on-defying-u-s-446f5f7f>

¹⁷¹ Juan N. Garcia-Nieto, “Year Two: Appraising Chinese Foreign Policy Towards War in Ukraine”, China Observers, Viewed on 2024 March 10th, <https://chinaobservers.eu/year-two-appraising-chinese-foreign-policy-towards-the-war-in-ukraine/>

¹⁷² David Sacks, "What Is China Learning from Russia's War in Ukraine?." *Foreign Affairs* 16 (2022).

¹⁷³ Robert Kagan, “A free world, if you can keep it: Ukraine and American interests”. *Foreign Affairs*. 102 (2023): 39.

¹⁷⁴ Thomas S. Warrick, “Your primer on the US House security bills for Ukraine, Israel, the Indo-Pacific, and more”, Atlantic Council, viewed on: 2024 May 5th, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/your-primer-on-the-us-house-security-bills-for-ukraine-israel-the-indo-pacific-and-more/>

¹⁷⁵ Dan Baer, „Denying Ukraine the Support It Needs Will Raise the Cost of U.S. Readiness“, Carnegie Endowment, viewed on 2024 March 29th, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/03/denying-ukraine-the-support-it-needs-will-raise-the-cost-of-us-readiness?lang=en>

Ukraine as not just a war caused by Russia's imperialistic ambitions, but as a stage for the broader confrontation between the democratic and authoritarian worlds. Moreover, if the American support to Ukraine would end, for instance, as a 'punishment' for accepting Chinese mediator role, Ukraine's defeat would not be in the greater U.S interest as it would signal that the authoritarian China is a more reliable partner, which in turn could proceed with trying to take back the Taiwan-strait and derail U.S credibility even further.

In such a context, the U.S-China competition has emerged as the dominant focus even in the highly polarized American politics. For example, the 2022 American National Military Strategy document prioritizes competition with China over Europe, whereas the 2022 National Defense Strategy identified China as the most comprehensive challenge to American national security¹⁷⁶. Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the U.S had already been reallocating its resources and attention to the Indo-Pacific region, recognizing the strategic importance of countering China's growing influence in that area. Consequently, policymakers in Washington are eager to expedite the resolution of the conflict in Ukraine to redirect the attention and resources back once again to the South China Sea (SCS)¹⁷⁷. Hence, acknowledging China's unique leverage over Putin, and accepting to make a temporary strategic concession in order to concentrate efforts for the greater objective, i.e., choosing to perhaps lose the battle to win the war, the U.S has decided not to explicitly oppose Ukraine's overtures for Chinese involvement to hopefully end the war on the European continent as fast as possible.

Therefore, by adeptly navigating the tensions between the U.S and China, Ukraine has sought to maximize its own strategic advantage and safeguard its interests in a complex geopolitical landscape. While the U.S. remains a crucial ally for Ukraine's defense against Russian aggression, Ukraine also maintains cordial relations with China, a rising power that holds considerable sway over Russia. Thus, Ukraine stresses the importance of China's engagement in the conflict resolution efforts, all the while sustaining strong bilateral trade relations. Senior director of the International Republican Institute, Stephen Nix, described this execution of the hedging strategy by Ukraine as "a marvelous job"¹⁷⁸. According to Nix, "*Ukraine needs China economically and commercially. So he [President Zelenskyi] has really threated the needle when it comes to diplomacy with China. On the one hand, he is urging the West to supply more weapons, more assistance. With China, it's a much more delicate game diplomatically. And I think the President has played that game quite well*"¹⁷⁹.

¹⁷⁶ U.S Department of Defense, „2022 National Security Strategy“,

https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025_Budget_Request.pdf

¹⁷⁷ Robert Kagan, "A free world, if you can keep it: Ukraine and American interests". *Foreign Affairs*. 102 (2023): 39.

¹⁷⁸ Stephen B. Nix, interview with author, Vilnius, 2024, March 22nd

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

Ultimately, it is unlikely that Ukraine would consider to bandwagon with China, given its aspiration to join Western alliances of NATO and the EU. However, considering the shifting American priorities, Ukraine is hesitant to solely align itself with the U.S either. Maintaining cordial relations with Beijing prevents further consolidation of the Russian-Sino alignment as well as serves an alternative to sustain Ukraine's economy and even as a potential security guarantee or leverage, at least until Ukraine's membership in the EU and NATO becomes a reality.

Conclusions

While the global order is shifting, the US remains the preeminent power in the world experiencing a transition from a unipolar to the multipolar international order. In this period of transition, the established liberal norms and principles are being eroded but the new world order has not yet been established. In this context, and especially since since the Russian full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine has been facing unprecedented uncertainty about its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and survival as a state overall. Furthermore, as the war erupted against the background of the already intensifying rivalry between the US and China, it is seen by them as a proxy stage to further their struggle for influence. This left Ukraine to deal with an additional and equally challenging dilemma of having to choose which of these major powers to side with. Within the Western discourse, China's position regarding the war has been perceived as leaning towards Russia, with accusations leveled at it for affiliating with the aggressor state bent on challenging and disrupting international stability. Therefore, the prevailing literature suggests that Ukraine mostly relies on the Western and particularly the US support and aligns itself exclusively with the democratic nations' bloc on the global arena. Nevertheless, as has been highlighted in the problem explored in this thesis, it has been observed that in response to the existential threat posed by Russia, Ukraine has instead chosen to navigate the dichotomy between democratic and authoritarian regimes in a more nuanced approach. As showcased

in this research through a thorough analysis of both primary and secondary qualitative sources, Ukraine has rather adopted a pragmatic stance and deemed China as “neutral” while actively seeking enhanced economic and political engagement with the rising global power.

By adopting the emerging theoretical thinking on hedging strategies, and particularly the decision-making of small states faced with alignment dilemmas in the context of great power competition, this thesis has sought to fill the conspicuous void in comprehending the intricacies of Ukrainian-Chinese relations in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Despite the apparent incongruity with Ukraine's primary foreign policy orientation towards alignment with the West, this research has demonstrated that Ukraine's experience of waning US' support created a significant deficit of trust in Kiev – pushing Ukrainian policymakers to remain cautious as neither continuity of backing by Washington, nor accession to NATO is guaranteed. This compelled Ukraine to adopt a pragmatic response characterized by a balanced assessment of risks and opportunities, guided by its overarching goal of safeguarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity which depends on the support of the great powers as much if not more than on Ukraine itself. While Ukrainians have heavily leaned on the US aid to maintain its defense against Russian aggression, the Ukrainian government could not ignore China's consolidation role as a global superpower challenging the US hegemony and goals to adopt a crucial mediating role. Therefore, declining to have a dialogue with China, posed the risk to Ukraine of not only pushing China closer to Russia but also siding with the ‘wrong’ side as the configuration of the future global order could potentially be determined by China.

Hence, this thesis was able to successfully confirm the hypothesis that Ukraine's foreign policy was indeed shaped by a hedging strategy aimed at leveraging the rivalries between the United States, Russia, and China to maximize its own benefits. Through a comprehensive analysis of the intricate relationships within the US-Russia-China triangle, Ukraine has strategically positioned itself to advance its interests while avoiding direct alignment with any single power bloc, by balancing efforts to ensure continued support from West and simultaneous pleas to the Chinese governments to contain its enabling of the Russian aggression as much as possible. This thesis has explained the multifaceted nature of Ukraine's engagement with China, encompassing diplomatic overtures, economic partnerships, and leveraging China's evolving global position. Despite China's ambiguous stance on the conflict in Ukraine, Ukraine recognized the potential for China to pressure Russia into ending the war and have welcomed Chinese participation in peace negotiations. Moreover, Ukraine aimed to prevent further consolidation of the Sino-Russian alliance, which would have detrimental consequences for Ukraine.

Furthermore, this thesis has underscored how despite most expectations, Ukraine was able to navigate the volatile broader geopolitical context. In the midst of the intensifying rivalry between the US, China, and Russia, which left Ukraine in a significantly precarious position of being primarily perceived as a pawn in their strategic competition, Ukraine's adept maneuvering of these tensions reflects not only its commitment to safeguarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also a keen understanding of geopolitical dynamics and necessary calculations even as a highly vulnerable state.

Therefore, the case of Ukraine explored in this thesis convincingly proves that in spite of a the size or the difficulty of the situation, even the smaller actors can successfully employ hedging strategy and exploit the competition of much greater states to their own advantage. Given the novelty of the topic of Sino-Ukrainian relations in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion, as well as the current prevalence of mostly qualitative sources and the scarcity of academic research, this thesis serves as grounds for further inquiry, encouraging the exploration of further quantitative research to delve into the intricacies raised and the constantly changing geopolitical realities in the context of the war in Ukraine.

Looking to the future on the policy side, when considering Ukraine's historical challenges to balance its relationships with major powers, such as the West and Russia, it is crucial to note that it is rather imperative for the country to proceed with caution while deliberating whether to align itself closely with any authoritarian regime. Past experiences, notably the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity, underscore the potential for crises stemming from attempts to maintain a multi-dual hedge between competing geopolitical interests. In the event of a direct confrontation between China and the US in the Taiwan Strait, Western states are likely to align themselves with the latter democratic superpower, leading to diplomatic and economic repercussions for China akin to those faced by Russia today. Given Ukraine's aspirations to integrate into the Western alliances such as NATO and the EU, which have demonstrated a growing distance from China, it is in Ukraine's best interest to align its foreign policy priorities accordingly. While it is evident that Ukraine places a high priority on nurturing its relationship with the China as an insurance policy, it is essential for the country to pursue a nuanced and balanced foreign policy approach that considers its broader geopolitical landscape. By prioritizing strategic autonomy and aligning its interests with those of like-minded democratic nations, Ukraine can effectively navigate the complex geopolitical dynamics of the 21st century while advancing its national interests and aspirations for the integration into Western institutions.

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SUMMARY

The Master's thesis "*Navigating Great Power Dynamics: Ukraine – China Relations in the Aftermath of Russia's Invasion in 2022*" has sought to address the problem of yet under-explored Ukraine-China relations following the Russian aggression. The Western literature has classified China as rather pro-Russian, alleging its alignment with the aggressive state aimed at challenging and destabilizing the established rules-based international order. However, it was determined that amidst the broader geopolitical clash between the democratic and authoritarian regimes, Ukraine, in quite a paradoxical move, chose to acknowledge China's stance as "neutral" and was eager to actively pursue closer economic and political ties with the rising power. While the existing academic discourse extensively delves into Sino-Russian, American-Russian, and Sino-American relations, there still remains a conspicuous void in comprehending recent Ukrainian-Chinese relations, which this thesis endeavored to fill. The presented analysis aimed to explain Ukraine's foreign policy towards China in the aftermath of the war despite China's close alignment with Russia, as well as the apparent contradiction with Ukraine's primary foreign policy objective of aligning with the Western sphere.

To execute this goal, the author has conducted an extensive review of the academic literature on the historic evolution of Ukrainian-Sino bilateral relations, presented and applied the theoretical framework of hedging strategy, analyzed China's response to the war in Ukraine and how it impacted bilateral relations between Ukraine and China, explored Ukraine's and China's perception of each other amidst the war in Ukraine and how it reflects current bilateral relationship between the two countries, explained Ukraine's motivation in choosing to accept China's pro-Russian "neutrality", as well as provided an overview of the great power competition of U.S.-Russia, Russia-China, and U.S.-China and to demonstrate how the rivalry between these great powers provides Ukraine with an opportunity to avoid full alignment with either of them.

The thorough analysis of the wide array of primary and secondary sources, including the semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian international relations experts, diplomats, and politicians, conducted by the author, allowed to confirm the thesis hypothesis that Ukraine's foreign policy can be explained by hedging strategy and was aimed at instrumentalizing rivalries within the broader U.S.-Russia-China triangle. This global competition also prevented Ukraine from openly taking sides, except in relations to Russia. In particular, the hesitation by the West to expressly aim for Ukraine's victory as well as the prolonged delays in supplying military aid, was the deciding factor forcing Ukraine to seek alternative options, with China emerging as a prospective partner to curb Russia's aggression and to potentially pressure it into ending the war.

The case of Ukraine explored in this thesis convincingly proves that in spite of the size or the difficulty of the situation, even the smaller actors can successfully employ hedging strategy and exploit the competition of much greater states to their own advantage. Given the novelty of the topic of Sino-Ukrainian relations in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion, as well as the current prevalence of mostly qualitative sources and the scarcity of academic research, this thesis serves as grounds for further inquiry, encouraging the exploration of further quantitative research to delve into the intricacies raised and the constantly changing geopolitical realities in the context of the war in Ukraine.

SANTRAUKA

Šiame magistro baigiamajame darbe „*Naviguojant tarp didžiųjų galių: Ukrainos-Kinijos santykiai po Rusijos invazijos 2022*“ buvo siekiama išspręsti dar pakankamai neišnagrinėtų Ukrainos ir Kinijos santykių po Rusijos agresijos problemą. Vakarų akademinėje literatūroje Kinijos pozicija karo atžvilgiu yra vertinama kaip veikiau prorusiška, teigiant, kad ji bendradarbiauja su šalimi agresore, siekiančia mesti iššūkį ir destabilizuoti nusistovėjusią taisyklėmis pagrįstą tarptautinę tvarką. Tačiau šiame darbe buvo pažymėta, kad platesnės geopolitinės kovos tarp demokratiškos ir autoritarinių režimų kontekste, Ukraina ėmėsi gana paradoksalaus sprendimo ir ryžosi pripažinti Kinijos poziciją „neutralia“, bei aktyviai siekė glaudesnių ekonominių ir politinių ryšių su šia augančia galia. Nors dabartiniame akademinėje diskurse yra plačiai nagrinėjami Kinijos ir Rusijos, Amerikos ir Rusijos bei Kinijos ir Amerikos santykiai, vis dar trūksta išsamesnių analizių, siekiančių suvokti pastarųjų metų Ukrainos ir Kinijos santykių dinamiką. Šią analitinę spragą buvo siekiama užpildyti šiame darbe išsikėlus tikslą paaiškinti Ukrainos užsienio politiką Kinijos atžvilgiu po karo, nepaisant Kinijos glaudaus ryšio su Rusija, taip pat išskylančio prieštaravimo pagrindiniam Ukrainos išreiškiamam užsienio politikos tikslui – prisijungimui prie Vakarų valstybių aljanso.

Siekiant išsikelto tikslo, autorė atliko išsamią akademinės literatūros apžvalgą apie istorinę Ukrainos ir Kinijos dvišalių santykių raidą, pristatė ir pritaikė teorinį neprisišliejimo strategijos (*hedging strategy*) pagrindą, išanalizavo Kinijos atsaką į karą Ukrainoje ir kaip jis paveikė dvišalius Ukrainos ir Kinijos santykius, taip pat nagrinėjo, kaip Ukraina ir Kinija suvokia viena kitą vykstant karui ir kaip tai atspindi dabartinius dvišalius santykius, paaiškino Ukrainos motyvą priimti Kinijos prorusišką „neutralumą“, pateikė JAV-Rusijos, Rusijos-Kinijos ir JAV-Kinijos didžiųjų galių konkurencijos apžvalgą ir parodė, kaip įtampa tarp šių didžiųjų valstybių suteikia Ukrainai galimybę išvengti visiško prisišliejimo prie nei vienos iš jų.

Nuodugni daugybės pirminių ir antrinių šaltinių analizė, įskaitant autorės atliktus pusiau struktūruotus interviu su Ukrainos tarptautinių santykių ekspertais, diplomatais ir politikais, leido patvirtinti magistrinio darbo hipotezę, kad Ukrainos užsienio politika gali būti paaiškinta apsidraudimo strategija ir buvo skirta išnaudoti konkurenciją platesniame JAV, Rusijos ir Kinijos konkurencijos trikampyje. Ši geopolitinė dinamika taip pat leido Ukrainai atvirai nestoti nei į vieną pusę, išskyrus santykių su Rusija atžvilgiu. Pažymėtina, kad būtent Vakarų apsisprendimo trūkumas aiškiai siekti Ukrainos pergalės, taip pat vilkinamas karinės pagalbos teikimas, buvo lemiamas veiksnys, privertęs Ukrainą ieškoti alternatyvių variantų, Kinijai tampant potencialia partnere Rusijos agresijai pažaboti ir potencialiai priversti ją užbaigti karą.

Šiame darbe pasitelkus Ukrainos atvejį, buvo įtikinamai parodyta, kad nepaisant dydžio ar situacijos sudėtingumo, net ir mažiau galingos valstybės gali sėkmingai taikyti neprisišliejimo strategiją ir išnaudoti daug didesnių valstybių konkurenciją savo naudai. Atsižvelgiant į Kinijos ir Ukrainos santykių temos naujumą po plataus masto Rusijos invazijos, taip pat į dabartinį dažniausiai kokybinių šaltinių prieinamumą ir akademinį tyrimų trūkumą, šis darbas galėtų tapti pagrindu ateities kiekybiniais tyrimams, kuriuose būtų toliau gilinamasi į iškeltus klausimus ir nuolat besikeičiančias geopolitines realijas karo Ukrainoje kontekste.