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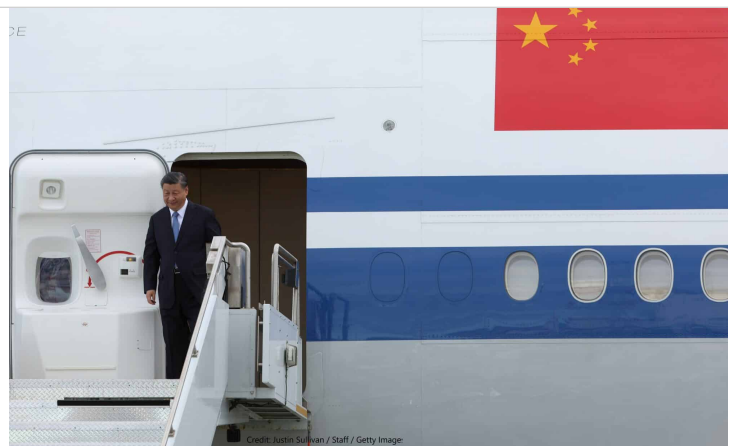


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COMMENTARY

# Russia's war in Ukraine: mapping China's perceptions about the United States, the EU and Russia



DATE  
08 Dec 2023

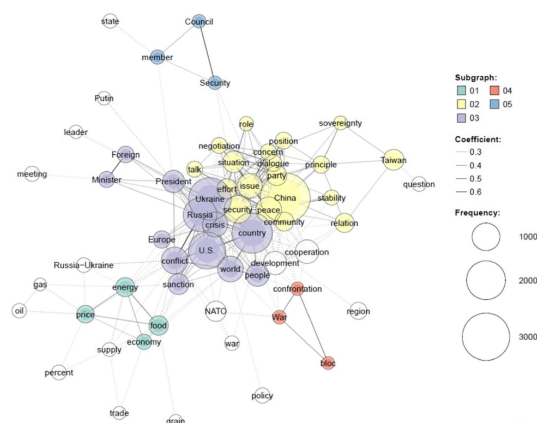
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*Angela Pennisi di Floristella and Xuechen Chen draw on [recently published research](#) to explore China’s perceptions of key actors in Russia’s war in Ukraine, highlighting that Europe is framed as a marginal player and a victim of the war.*

There has been considerable speculation about the deepening economic and security ties between China and Russia and [scepticism](#) about China’s potential to play a mediating role between Russia and Ukraine .However, there is a notable paucity of information on China’s perceptions of the key actors in Russia’s war in Ukraine. Gaining an understanding of these perceptions is important for discerning the prospects for either cooperation or confrontation.

A study conducted between February 2022 and 30 November 2022, has examined the portrayal of the Ukrainian conflict in press releases from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and state-led media reports from China Daily and Xinhua News. This analysis has delineated key patterns, themes, and characteristics of the Chinese narrative, which are depicted in the co-occurrence network of the 300 most frequently utilised words below.



There were several key observations from the study:

Firstly, China regards the United States as the principal entity at the heart of the international security architecture, attributing to it the greatest responsibility for the conflict in Ukraine. Empirical evidence indicates that the term 'United States' occurs more frequently than 'Russia' in the analysed texts. Both the United States and NATO are depicted as instigators of conflict, perpetuating what they term a 'rules-based international order' that systematically undermines global peace and security.

Consequently, the conflict in Ukraine is interpreted not as a regional dispute between Russia and Ukraine but as a facet of the broader geostrategic rivalry involving Russia, the United States, and its principal allies. Paramount among these concerns is the portrayal of NATO's aggressive eastward expansion, which has consistently dismissed Russia's stern admonitions, as the fundamental catalyst for the war in Ukraine ([China Daily, 13 July 2022](#); [MFA, 17 March 2022](#)).

Second, in China's eyes, Europe plays a negligible role in the Russia-Ukraine war. Not only are references to 'Europe' and the 'EU' significantly lower than those of 'China', 'US', 'Russia', and 'NATO' but Europe or European countries are primarily referred to as US 'allies'. While China expresses support for the EU's efforts to craft its 'strategic autonomy', it

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claims that the EU is politically and militarily subordinate to and dependent on the US, which is depicted as the country taking the overall advantage from the prolonged Russian-Ukraine conflict.

This is reflected, for instance, in the following excerpt: 'The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict has taken a heavy toll on Europe politically, economically, and socially, while the US benefits from it, with arms-dealers popping champagne and American grain and energy industries making exorbitant profits' ([MFA, 29 June 2022](#)).

At the same time, Europe is not only framed as a marginal player but also as one of the major victims of the Russia-Ukraine war. For China, the EU and European countries have in fact suffered the most severe humanitarian, economic and social costs, including the devastating effect on energy supplies and prices, as highlighted by the following statements: 'Another 2.6 million refugees fleeing the Russia-Ukraine conflict have entered European countries, which are the real victims of the current situation', from the Chinese Ministry for Foreign Affairs, ([MFA, 18 March 2022](#)) and '[S]anctions have caused enormous hardship for ordinary Russian citizens as well as citizens across the EU member states', from the publication *China Daily* ([China Daily, 19 August 2022](#)).

Thirdly, the study suggests that China portrays itself as the sole impartial and

equitable actor, advocating its role as part of a collective 'international community' and positioning itself as the most appropriate entity to provide security, stability, and peace in Ukraine. By depicting itself as a disinterested party, China not only keeps a careful distance from Russia but also presents itself as uninvolved in the rivalry between Russia and the United States/Western bloc. Furthermore, it reiterates its longstanding stance of non-alignment, cautioning against misconceptions of the 'Beijing-Moscow Axis' ([MFA, 18 March 2022](#)).

However, there are certain inconsistencies in China's ostensibly cautious stance towards Russia. For example, Chinese sources consistently avoid acknowledging that Russia has breached Ukrainian sovereignty by invading its territory. They refer to the concept of sovereignty only in the context of Taiwan. On the contrary, in the case of Ukraine they advocate for addressing Russia's legitimate security concerns, effectively sidestepping any calls for the withdrawal of Russian forces from occupied regions.

While China asserts that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries should be upheld in accordance with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, this argument is selectively applied to Taiwan rather than to Russia's acts of aggression in Ukraine. Simultaneously, Russia's actions are portrayed as a logical defensive measure,

a reaction to attempts by the US and NATO to compromise Russian security.

In summary, China is uncomfortable with the US-centric global security framework. Its aspiration is to lead the reform of global security governance towards a new paradigm that 'replaces confrontation and alliance-based zero-sum thinking with dialogue, partnership, and mutually beneficial outcomes' ([MFA, 6 May 2022](#)).

The marginalisation of the EU and European nations in these narratives may also indicate China's intention to pressure Europe to detach from the US and, potentially, to adjust its foreign policies to be more attuned to the interests of the Global South, including China's.

Ultimately, the findings of the study suggest that it is an oversimplification to reduce China's perspective on Russia to a single dimension. Although China has, to a certain extent, supported Russia's interpretation of the conflict and views Russia as a potential ally in the reformation of global security governance, its narratives are rife with contradictions. In turn, these contradictory views provide some evidence that China's foreign and security policy, including prospect of cooperation and confrontation, is still in the making.

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**Anand Menon**  
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