

The China Nuclear Taboo and Russia's War in Ukraine

by Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse official Chinese government communication on the issue of nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear warfare since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, as well as to provide an overview of the analytical debate surrounding this issue in China. This paper concludes that China, in comparison to other Russian policies, has reacted to its nuclear policy the strongest, making the topic an open point of contention between China and Russia.

China | Ukraine | Russia | Nuclear non-proliferation

keywords

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1. Introduction: Background of the Chinese position

The official approach of the People's Republic of China (henceforth: China, PRC) to Russia's war in Ukraine is one of neutrality, with top leadership and officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs making a specific emphasis on the consistency of this position, arguably to counterbalance criticisms that the approach has not been clearly defined: "China's position on the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis [...] is clear, consistent and centered on promoting peace talks."¹

However, since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, it has been pointed out that China is acting as Russia's enabler in some instances, including Chinese government activity which impacts the conflict in Ukraine; Chinese efforts to undermine international sanctions on Russia; statements by Chinese government officials on the Ukraine conflict; as well as Chinese media stories reflecting official Russian positions and censorship guidelines.²

Additionally, although the Russian invasion runs counter to a seven decades old formula of Chinese foreign policy, namely, the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence, which advocates for "mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's

¹ Zhang Kaiwei and Wu Chaolan, "China Position on Ukraine Crisis Clear, Consistent: Foreign Ministry", in *People's Daily Online*, 2 March 2023, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2023/0302/c90000-10215246.html>.

² US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *China's Position on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*, Washington, 26 April 2023, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-position-russias-invasion-ukraine>.

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internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence";³ China has not spoken out regarding Russia's violations of these principles. Instead, it has insisted that "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity is the political foundation of China-Ukraine relations" and that "China did not create the Ukraine crisis, nor is it a party to the crisis."⁴

Such tacit Chinese support and a lack of criticism over the breach of Ukraine's sovereignty on Russia's behalf, yet a reluctance to fully get behind the Russian agenda, has been described as "pro-Russia neutrality",⁵ or "home before dark" ambiguity, which involves venturing out from a middle ground into the Russian camp and showing rhetorical support for Russia, while also taking countermeasures as to not be cast permanently as a Russian ally.⁶

On the one hand, Russia's attack of Ukraine in 2022 has hurt the PRC's interests in several respects. First of all, it has jeopardised China's bilateral economic ties with Ukraine, as well as Beijing's multilateral projects – most famously the Belt and Road initiative, which hinged on Ukraine's involvement. Secondly, it has endangered the wellbeing of the over ten thousand Chinese nationals who were based in Ukraine prior to the Russian full-scale invasion.⁷ Thirdly, China, as the main buyer of Ukrainian grain exports, was hit hard by this import route closing for the duration of the Russian blockade of three Ukrainian Black Sea ports, which was only lifted upon the signing of the "Initiative on the Safe Transportation of Grain and Foodstuffs from Ukrainian ports" in July 2022.⁸ According to Caitlin Welsh, the director of the Global Food Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "China is far and away the greatest recipient of any grain that's exported from Ukraine under the deal" and "has a strong interest in the continuation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative."⁹ Since the deal has been struck, however, the grain route has remained a topic in Russian bargaining and the Kremlin's threats to discontinue it have been constant,¹⁰ leading to a

³ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *China's Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence*, 17 November 2000, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/200011/t20001117_697812.html.

⁴ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *President Xi Jinping Speaks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the Phone*, 26 April 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202304/t20230426_11066785.html.

⁵ Kathrin Hille, "Xi Pursues Policy of 'Pro-Russia Neutrality' Despite Ukraine War", in *Financial Times*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/bf930a62-6952-426b-b249-41097094318a>.

⁶ Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, "Home before Dark: China's Approach to The Russian War in Ukraine", in *Defence Strategic Communications*, Vol. 11 (Autumn 2022), p. 271-286, <https://doi.org/10.30966/2018.RIGA.11.10>.

⁷ Frederik Kelter, "China's Media Realities Clash over Truth about War in Ukraine", in *Al Jazeera*, 1 April 2023, <https://aje.io/f6wimq>.

⁸ United Nations website: *Black Sea Grain Initiative Joint Coordination Centre*, <https://www.un.org/en/node/185642>.

⁹ Christina Lu, "China Won't Let Russia Starve the World", in *Foreign Policy*, 17 May 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/17/russia-ukraine-grain-deal-china-food-security>.

¹⁰ Most recently at the time of writing: "Russia Considers Withdrawing from Grain Deal – Putin", in *TASS*, 13 June 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1631645>.

discontinuation at the time of writing,¹¹ signalling little stability to China. It is no surprise, then, that "facilitating grain exports" is one of the points in China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis: "All parties need to implement the Black Sea Grain Initiative signed by Russia, Türkiye, Ukraine and the UN fully and effectively in a balanced manner, and support the UN in playing an important role in this regard."¹² The last aspect, however, might be secondary, as China has used the situation to put forward its own "cooperation initiative on global food security".¹³ The initiative argues in favour of facilitating "the entry of Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian agricultural products and inputs into the international market"¹⁴ – addressing precisely the grievance expressed time and time again by Russian President Vladimir Putin, that the West had been unfairly keeping Russian agricultural goods from accessing world markets.¹⁵

On the other hand, Russia's attack has a clear anti-American thrust, which could be beneficial for China's interests. "The United States has developed a hegemonic playbook to stage 'color revolutions,' instigate regional disputes, and even directly launch wars under the guise of promoting democracy, freedom and human rights",¹⁶ reads the document "US Hegemony and Its Perils" published by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 2023. If Russia fails, for China it would mean an advance of the US-led security architecture – the same architecture China is trying to push back on. Under the current circumstances, a full victory of Ukraine means "there can be no peace at the expense of territorial compromises. The territorial integrity of Ukraine must be restored within the 1991 borders",¹⁷ as Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskyy pointed out in the phone call with PRC President and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping on 26 April 2023. As Zhang Jian from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) puts it, the US advance into Europe on the back of "the Ukraine crisis" is already underway:

¹¹ Rob Picheta, Mick Krever and Anna Chernova, "Russia Pulls out of Ukraine Grain Deal, in Potential Blow to Global Food Supplies", in *CNN*, 17 July 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/17/europe/russia-ukraine-grain-deal-intl/index.html>.

¹² Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*, 24 February 2023, point 9, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Wang Yi Puts Forward China's Cooperation Initiative on Global Food Security*, 8 July 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202207/t20220709_10717974.html.

¹⁵ "Russia Was 'Once Again Deceived' within Grain Deal – Putin", in *TASS*, 13 June 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1631647>.

¹⁶ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *US Hegemony and Its Perils*, 20 February 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230220_11027664.html.

¹⁷ Ukrainian Presidency, *President of Ukraine Had a Phone Call with the President of the People's Republic of China*, 26 April 2023, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vidbulasya-telefonna-rozmova-prezidenta-ukrayini-z-golovoyu-82489>.

[European countries] are powerless in the face of Russia, and nearly all European countries have turned their eyes to NATO and the United States on defense matters. After the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, the so-called military containment of Russia mainly depended on the United States, which increased its military presence in Europe [...].¹⁸

A Ukrainian triumph could only solidify this presence.

Via this and similar documents, China conveys, somewhat in line with the Russian official narrative, that the war in Ukraine is a result of US actions and is being fought not at the behest of a sovereign Ukraine: "As the culprit and the leading instigator of the Ukraine crisis, the US has led NATO in pursuing five rounds of eastward expansion in the two decades or so since 1999."¹⁹ Following this logic, a Ukrainian victory would automatically mean a triumph of the United States of America, which runs contrary to China's strategic goals. Therefore, China's approach, although not fully backing Russia, has still been closer to the Russian worldview than the Western one.

Under this assumption, it becomes important to look for possible aspects of Russia's actions or rhetoric that push Beijing out of its comfort zone. The next section argues that the nuclear threat expressed by the Russian president is a strong candidate for this role.

2. "Nuclear wars cannot be won": A glimpse of discord between Russia and China?

As German Chancellor Olaf Scholz commented after his visit to Beijing in early November 2022: "Putin's war challenges the global peace order. At our meeting in Beijing, I asked General Secretary Xi to use his influence on Russia."²⁰ Right after the meeting, the phrasing used by Scholz was even stronger: "President Xi and I agree: nuclear threats are irresponsible and incendiary. [...] By using nuclear weapons, Russia would be crossing a line that the community of states has drawn together."²¹

¹⁸ Zhang Jian, "Development Prospects of the EU during the Ukraine Crisis", in *Contemporary International Relations*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (January/February 2023), p. 4-25 at p. 11, <http://www.cicir.ac.cn/NEW/en-us/opinion.html?id=7fe66cd6-47e4-4469-9a40-504ba4acd8c7>.

¹⁹ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on April 1, 2022*, 1 April 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202204/t20220401_10663214.html.

²⁰ German Federal Government, *Federal Chancellor Scholz on His Inaugural Visit to China: Shared Global Responsibility*, 4 November 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/federal-chancellor-in-china-2140012>.

²¹ Andreas Rinke and Eduardo Baptista, "Xi, Scholz Warn Against 'Irresponsible' Nuclear Threats over Ukraine", in *Reuters*, 4 November 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/german-chancellor-scholz-lands-beijing-2022-11-04>.

Although the Chinese readout did not contain the words “irresponsible” or “incendiary”, it still paid considerable attention to the nuclear issue:

The two leaders also exchanged views on the Ukraine crisis. President Xi reaffirmed China's support for Germany and Europe to play an important role in facilitating peace talks and to build a balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture in Europe. Under the current circumstances, the international community should: [...] oppose the threat or use of nuclear weapons, advocate that nuclear weapons cannot be used and that nuclear wars must not be fought, and prevent a nuclear crisis in Eurasia.²²

Yu Jie, senior China research fellow at Chatham House in London, underscored the importance of this statement as a potential game changer for the Chinese position: “If there is one thing to make Xi change his stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it would be the looming potential of deploying nuclear weapons from Moscow.”²³

China's nuclear taboo was picked up by the president of the United States Joe Biden at the G20 summit in Bali in mid-November 2022, approximately ten days after Scholz's trip to China. During his meeting with Xi, according to the White House readout,

President Biden raised Russia's brutal war against Ukraine and Russia's irresponsible threats of nuclear use. President Biden and President Xi reiterated their agreement that a nuclear war should never be fought and can never be won and underscored their opposition to the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine.²⁴

During the same Bali summit, China raised the nuclear issue with Russia directly, too. In a diplomatic manner, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed to his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in a meeting that “China has noted that Moscow has recently reiterated its long-standing position that nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought, which has shown Russia's rational and responsible attitude.”²⁵ Given Putin's rhetoric, this statement can be better perceived as a cautionary warning rather than a compliment.

²² Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *President Xi Jinping Meets with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz*, 4 November 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202211/t20221104_10800546.html.

²³ Guy Chazan, Edward White and Yuan Yang, “Scholz Says Xi Agrees Nuclear Threats over Ukraine Are ‘Irresponsible’”, in *Financial Times*, 4 November 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/66a8aa7b-b7a1-48f2-b893-9716dec8efce>.

²⁴ White House, *Readout of President Joe Biden's Meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China*, 14 November 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/14/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-meeting-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china>.

²⁵ Zhao Jia, “Wang: China Keeping Fair Position on Ukraine Issue”, in *China Daily*, 16 November 2022, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202211/16/WS63741dcca310491754329e95.html>.

Still, Moscow's attitude continued to be anything but "rational and responsible". As Russia's war effort continued with mixed results, President Putin kept showing reluctance to exclude the nuclear option as one of the escalation scenarios surrounding the war in Ukraine. "Concerning the threat of nuclear war. Ms Makovetskaya, you are right, the threat is growing, to be honest", he said in response to a question during the meeting with the members of the Council for Civil Society and Human Rights.²⁶

On the brink of the first anniversary of Russia's invasion, on 21 February 2023, Russia suspended its participation in the US-Russian New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which set limits to the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads and their delivery systems (which Russia said it would nonetheless continue to respect) and allowed for reciprocal on-site inspections to verify compliance. Putin announced putting new strategic systems on combat duty and spoke of taking up nuclear tests.²⁷ That was when the PRC's top diplomat, Wang Yi, the director of the CCP Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission, was in Moscow on an official visit. When speaking to Putin and later to Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov, Wang remained loyal to the trifecta of the Chinese definition of a bilateral relationship: "The China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era has never targeted any third party, nor does it tolerate any third party's interference or coercion."²⁸ The nuclear issue did not come up in the official readouts. However, China's Global Security Initiative Concept Paper also came to light almost the same day, containing harsh language on this particular topic, calling on "all parties to":

Firmly uphold the consensus that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought". Comply with the joint statement on preventing nuclear war and avoiding arms races issued by leaders of the five nuclear-weapon states in January 2022. Strengthen dialogue and cooperation among nuclear-weapon states to reduce the risk of nuclear war. Safeguard the international nuclear non-proliferation regime based on the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and actively support the efforts of countries in relevant regions to establish nuclear-weapon-free zones. Promote international cooperation on nuclear security, so as

²⁶ Russian Presidency, *Council for Civil Society and Human Rights Meeting*, 7 December 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70046>.

²⁷ Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia's Putin Issues New Nuclear Warnings to West over Ukraine", in *Reuters*, 22 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-update-russias-elite-ukraine-war-major-speech-2023-02-21>.

²⁸ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Russian President Vladimir Putin Meets with Wang Yi*, 22 February 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030788.html. E.g., "The security of a country should not be pursued at the expense of others. The security of a region should not be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs. The legitimate security interests and concerns of all countries must be taken seriously and addressed properly." Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*, cit., point 2.

to build a fair, collaborative and mutually beneficial international nuclear security system.²⁹

Also, just two days later, on the anniversary proper, China published its official Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis (henceforth: the Position paper). Against the background of non-specific statements such as "ceasing hostilities" and "resuming peace talks", as well as statements backing Russia's position,³⁰ an implicit dissatisfaction with the Russian nuclear rhetoric and actions, including the occupation of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, shone through the document. Relatively strong language appears here, as two out of the total of three formulations "China opposes" from the document are used in those paragraphs (italicised by author in quotes below):

Keeping nuclear power plants safe. *China opposes* armed attacks against nuclear power plants or other peaceful nuclear facilities, and calls on all parties to comply with international law including the Convention on Nuclear Safety (CNS) and resolutely avoid man-made nuclear accidents. China supports the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in playing a constructive role in promoting the safety and security of peaceful nuclear facilities. [...] Reducing strategic risks. Nuclear weapons must not be used and nuclear wars must not be fought. The threat or use of nuclear weapons should be opposed. Nuclear proliferation must be prevented and nuclear crisis avoided. *China opposes* the research, development and use of chemical and biological weapons by any country under any circumstances.³¹

The timing, the language, and the application of underscoring the historical PRC nuclear taboo indeed was shaping to be a possible bone of contention between Russia and China. To the first point on the safety of civilian nuclear infrastructure, the Special Representative of the Chinese Government on Korean Peninsula Affairs Liu Xiaoming tweeted on 9 March 2023 that "China decided to contribute 200,000 euros through the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN nuclear watchdog] to technical assistance to Ukraine on nuclear safety and security. This is just one concrete step China has taken to support the IAEA's efforts to strengthen nuclear safety in Ukraine."³² Although the amount of the sum granted to the IAEA by China can be regarded as purely symbolic, the decision itself pointed towards the PRC being interested in involving the international organisation tasked with ensuring nuclear safety rather than working with its "no-limits" partner Russia directly.

²⁹ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper*, 21 February 2023, point 3, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221_11028348.html.

³⁰ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*, cit.

³¹ *Ibid.*, points 7 and 8.

³² Liu Xiaoming (@AmbLiuXiaoMing), "China decided to contribute 200,000 euros through the IAEA", *Twitter*, 9 March 2023, <https://twitter.com/AmbLiuXiaoMing/status/1633637864893452288>.

Reportedly, China's signals to Russia were particularly strong behind closed doors. Xi Jinping "personally warned Vladimir Putin against using nuclear weapons in Ukraine" during his visit to Moscow in March 2023, a *Financial Times* publication disclosed in July 2023, drawing on sources in China, Russia and the US.³³

Western political leaders continued to press on China's nuclear sensitivity. More recently, when the Polish Deputy Minister Wojciech Gerwel met the newly appointed Special Envoy of the Chinese Government for Eurasian Affairs, Ambassador Li Hui, to discuss Russian aggression in Ukraine, or, as the Chinese official read-out puts it, to discuss the "political settlement of the Ukraine crisis",³⁴ Gerwel put an emphasis on both nuclear issues mentioned in China's Position paper. According to the Polish official read-out,

Deputy Minister Gerwel condemned Russia's *threats of use of nuclear weapons*. This fact sets a dangerous precedent and may have [...] negative implications for the other parts of the world. Poland counts on concrete actions by China towards Russia – the aggressor state blackmailing the world with the use of these weapons. Deputy Minister underlined the need for the *support of the International Atomic Energy Agency* by the international community, including China; in particular the *safe functioning of the nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia* must be ensured.³⁵ (Italicised by author.)

This was not random – the Polish side was well aware that the nuclear threat expressed by Putin and used in official propaganda numerous times since and the risks of accidents at the Zaporizhzhia power plant were the two issues concerning Russia's invasion that China had publicly expressed discomfort over.

China's rhetoric has so far not deterred the Russian leader from speaking out on changing the nuclear status-quo. On 25 March 2023, in an interview on the state television channel *Rossiya 24*, President Putin stated that Russia will complete the construction of a storage facility to place tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus³⁶ – a move that is arguably contrary to China's position on non-

³³ Max Seddon et al., "Xi Jinping Warned Vladimir Putin against Nuclear Attack in Ukraine", in *Financial Times*, 5 July 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/c5ce76df-9b1b-4dfc-a619-07da1d40cbd3>.

³⁴ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Special Representative of the Chinese Government on Eurasian Affairs Li Hui Holds Talks with Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland Wojciech Gerwel*, 19 May 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202305/t20230522_11081026.html.

³⁵ Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Deputy Minister Wojciech Gerwel Met the Special Envoy of the Chinese Government for Eurasian Affairs*, 19 May 2023, <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/deputy-minister-wojciech-gerwel-met-the-special-envoy-of-the-chinese-government-for-eurasian-affairs>.

³⁶ "Putin Says Russia Will Deploy Nuclear Weapons in Belarus", in *Al Jazeera*, 25 March 2023, <https://aje.io/fjmxia>; "Россия разместит в Белоруссии тактическое ядерное оружие" [Russia to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus], in *Ria Novosti*, 26 March 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230325/>

proliferation expressed in strategic documents generally and in the Position paper on Ukraine in particular. It should be pointed out that Putin made sure to provide arguments that this move does not, strictly speaking, constitute a case of nuclear proliferation, as Moscow, not Minsk, will remain in control of the arsenal.³⁷ Still, this does little to counter China's worry over the spread of nuclear weapons – after all, China has traditionally opposed NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements and criticised the AUKUS nuclear submarine cooperation deal between the US, UK and Australia,³⁸ showing China adheres to a wider reading of nuclear proliferation.

China also continues to be vocal about the unease over the challenges a nuclear plant faces in a war zone: "The continuing Ukraine crisis poses a grim challenge to the safety and security of Ukraine's nuclear facilities. China takes this seriously",³⁹ commented the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson after IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi called on the United Nations Security Council to take all measures to prevent a nuclear accident on 30 May.⁴⁰

The Special Representative of the Chinese Government on Eurasian Affairs Li used a different approach, putting the issues of China's major concern into the mouths of his European interlocutors, as he visited Ukraine, Poland, France, Germany, the EU headquarters in Belgium, and Russia in May 2023:

Looking back on his trips, Li said he was impressed that all parties are highly concerned about potential spillover effects from the crisis, especially nuclear safety, humanitarian issues and food security. If a nuclear war happens, no country can stay safe on its own, Li pointed out. He urged all sides to ensure the safety of nuclear facilities and take concrete measure to cool down the situation.⁴¹

The Chinese analytical community also joined in the unpacking of the Russian nuclear threats. Wu Chunsi from Shanghai Institutes for International Studies commented on the "crisis in Ukraine" as a watershed for nuclear powers and

khranilische-1860641929.html.

³⁷ Ekaterina Svinova, "Политолог Бовт оценил реакцию Китая на размещение ядерного оружия в Беларуси" [Political scientist Bovt assessed China's reaction to the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus], in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 28 March 2023, <https://rg.ru/2023/03/28/politolog-bovt-ocenil-reakciiu-kitaia-na-razmeshchenie-iadernogo-oruzhiia-v-belarusi.html>.

³⁸ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on June 9, 2023*, 9 June 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202306/t20230609_11094406.html.

³⁹ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on June 2, 2023*, 2 June 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202306/t20230602_11088806.html.

⁴⁰ International Atomic Energy Agency, *Update 160 – IAEA Director General Statement on Situation in Ukraine*, 2 June 2023, <https://www.iaea.org/node/115472>.

⁴¹ "China Willing to Do Anything to Ease Situation in Ukraine: Chinese Envoy", in *CGTN*, 2 June 2023, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-06-02/China-willing-to-do-anything-to-ease-situation-in-Ukraine-Li-Hui-1kjqp1d1rfa/index.html>.

strategic stability:

the crisis in Ukraine that erupted shortly afterwards drastically changed relations between the nuclear-weapon states. In particular, there has been a reversal of momentum in US-Russian nuclear disarmament. [...] Currently, the US and Russia are blaming each other for compliance issues, Russia has suspended the New START Treaty, the US-Russian strategic stability talks are difficult to resume, and the nuclear risk on the battlefield in Ukraine lingers.⁴²

Jin Ying, Researcher of the Japan Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, when analysing Japan's changing nuclear debate, stresses the differences in the Russian approach, which she calls "nuclear intimidation", and the Chinese one: "After the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, Japan had the subjective imagination that China would follow Russia's 'escalate to de-escalate' nuclear intimidation in resolving the Taiwan issue to deter the US and Japan from intervening."⁴³ The author draws a connection between the war in Ukraine and the worsening, from China's perspective, strategic and nuclear landscape close to China's borders. It is evident from these and other publications that Russian "nuclear intimidation" is not viewed as being in China's interests, nor is it supported by the PRC think-tank community.

3. Conclusion – How far is too far for Beijing?

Clearly, even if there are Russian actions or statements that drive Beijing to signal discontent, one must still keep in mind that in terms of comparative strategic proximity Beijing remains much closer to Moscow than to the Western capitals. We should not underestimate China's relationship with Russia, as the anti-Western and anti-American driver behind Russia's invasion is a strong motivation for China to smooth over differences.

Still, it is interesting to observe that while China's reaction to other statements made by the Russian leadership has been soft and even appeasing at times, nuclear proliferation and nuclear risks have not only failed to produce any messages of support to Russia's statements on the official Chinese side, but China has outspokenly pushed back against Russia. Unlike in other cases, China has even demonstrated a certain degree of proactive curbing of Russia's action in the nuclear field via such strategic documents as the Global Security Initiative Concept Paper,

⁴² Wu Chunsi, "吴菀思: 动荡变革期的全球核安全治理" [Wu Chunsi: Global nuclear security governance in a period of turbulent change], in *Aisixiang*, 22 March 2023, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/141714.html>.

⁴³ Jin Ying, "金赢: 美日 '核共享': 历史基础、演进趋势与应对策略" [Jin Ying: US-Japan 'nuclear sharing': historical basis, evolution trend and countermeasures], in *Aisixiang*, 16 February 2023, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/140773.html>.

in direct communication surrounding IAEA, in statements concerning Ukraine, including the Position paper on Ukraine, on the UN level, as well as during bilateral meetings with Russian and even American counterparts.

China's approach to Russian nuclear policy will certainly remain an important counter-factor within the Russia-China partnership. China has been unsuccessful in keeping Russia's top leadership from bringing up nuclear escalation time and time again. Whether or not Beijing can deter Russia's actions rather than just its rhetoric, however, is a different line of enquiry. Given China's economic leverage over Russia, which has only increased after the sanctions on Russia following the full-scale invasion of 24 February 2022, one could make the argument that China's leadership is uniquely positioned to impact Russia's nuclear decision-making. The circumstantial evidence does point to China's rhetoric having had an effect; however, it remains unknown to what extent China's effect on Russia's actions is mitigated by the limited rationality of Vladimir Putin.

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