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**NAVIGATING COMPLEXITIES:
THE EU'S PERCEPTIONS OF
CHINA'S ROLE IN THE UKRAINIAN
CONFLICT AND IMPLICATIONS
FOR THE EU-CHINA
RELATIONSHIP**

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"NAVIGATING COMPLEXITIES: THE EU'S PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA'S ROLE IN THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU-CHINA RELATIONSHIP"²

The EU-China relationship has evolved from a mere economic partnership to a multifaceted relation, with the EU perceiving China as a cooperation partner, economic competitor, and systemic rival since 2019. In 2022, the eruption of armed conflict in Ukraine prompted a significant response from the EU, including sanctions against Russia and indirect measures like capping Russian oil prices for third countries.

This event triggered a shift in EU foreign policy, with China maintaining neutrality while facing assertive European demands. This article examines the EU's view of China's response to the Ukrainian conflict, analyzing China's peace principles and their potential impact on the broader EU-China relationship.

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Keywords: EU-China Relationships, Ukrainian Conflict, Discourse, EU Perception, EU Foreign Policy.

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INTRODUCTION

On the 24th of February, the world was rocked by the entry of Russian soldiers into Ukraine, triggering a global shockwave. Reactions to the scale and intensity of the military conflict varied between major Western actors and other third-countries. The French president, along with European colleagues, swiftly described it as a war and called for significant sanctions against Russia.³ Leaders from the West, including Boris Johnson⁴ and President Joe Biden of the United States⁵, echoed this stance with staunch condemnation and promises of sanctions.

Within the European Union, representatives took a united front, expressing their outrage over the Russian intervention and imposing extensive sanctions on the Kremlin. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen in a press conference with the Secretary General of the North-Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Jens Stoltenberg, and the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, declared, on the 24th of February, that :

“We will hold Russia accountable for this outrageous violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. And what is at stake is not just Donbas, it is not just Ukraine. What is at stake is the stability of Europe and the whole international order, our peace order. President Putin chose to bring war back to Europe”.⁶

However, most third-countries outside the Western bloc exercised caution, refraining from imposing sanctions against Russia. The Chinese spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hua Chunying, did not condemn the military operation and declared that the Chinese position lies on the pursuit of a “common, cooperative and sustainable security for all countries. The legitimate security concerns of all sides should be respected and resolved. We hope all sides will keep the door to peace open and continue to work for de-escalation through dialogue, consultation and negotiation and prevent further escalation”.⁷

³ Vie-publique.fr, “Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, président de la République, sur l’Union européenne face au conflit en Ukraine, à Bruxelles le 24 février 2022”, February 24, 2022, <http://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/284101-emmanuel-macron-24022022-ukraine>.

⁴ Gov.uk, “PM Statement to the House of Commons on Ukraine: 24 February 2022”, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-to-the-house-of-commons-on-ukraine-24-february-2022>.

⁵ The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on Russia’s Unprovoked and Unjustified Attack on Ukraine”, February 24, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/24/remarks-by-president-biden-on-russias-unprovoked-and-unjustified-attack-on-ukraine/>.

⁶ European Commission, “Statement by the President”, accessed March 10, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_22_1332.

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2023”, accessed March 10, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202302/t20230224_11031269.html.

This contrasting approach towards the Ukrainian crisis raises questions about its significance, subsequent escalation, sanctions, and the supply of new arms. Moreover, this dichotomy between the European Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC) is not the sole challenge in their mutual relationship.

Formally established in 1978, the relationship between the European Economic Community (EEC), later to become the European Union (EU), and the PRC has undergone significant evolution. Initially centered on economic ties and cooperation as important vocabulary of their relationship,⁸ the relationship expanded to encompass security, climate, human rights, and various political committees for direct dialogue.⁹

The EU's approach towards China, as highlighted by the work of Crookes, could be described as "value-based." Apart from cooperating with China as a rapidly developing economic actor, the EU seeks comprehensive political and social transformation in China.¹⁰ This value-based engagement remains relevant, with human rights and political reforms remaining high on the European agenda towards China and can be traced back to the Prodi Commission.¹¹

However, 2019 marked a notable change in the European perspective when the European Commission published the "EU-China – A strategic outlook." This document described China as a cooperation partner, negotiation partner, economic competitor, and a systemic rival, using "cooperation" less frequently than previous official documents.¹² Rising tensions between the EU and the PRC preceding this strategic outlook led to this shift in perception, with the French president declaring "the time of EU naïveté towards China has come to an end".¹³

Indeed, various irritants emerged in the early 2010s that strained the relationship, including the denial of Market Economy Status for China under the WTO, the arms embargo following the Tiananmen Square repression in 1989, and differing views on Chinese human rights records, as noted by Crookes.¹⁴ Additionally, disillusionment set in after the early 2000s "China fever" when expected political and economic reforms were not realized, prompting the EU to seek to improve

⁸ Jing Men, "The EU and China: Talk to Each Other or Talk across Each Other", *Asia Europe Journal* 20, no. 3 (September 2022): p. 236, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-021-00612-8>.

⁹ John Farnell and Paul Irwin Crookes, *The Politics of EU-China Economic Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), p. 173, <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-48874-9>.

¹⁰ Paul Irwin Crookes, "Resetting EU–China Relations from a Values-Based to an Interests-Based Engagement", *International Politics* 50, no. 5 (September 1, 2013): p. 647, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2013.25>.

¹¹ Romano Prodi, "2000-05: Shaping the New Europe", EU Commission - Working Document, 2000, <http://aei.pitt.edu/66298/>.

¹² Jing Men, "The EU and China", *op. cit.* p. 236.

¹³ Reuters, "Le Temps de La Naïveté de l'UE Envers La Chine Est Révolu", March 22, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/union-chine-macron-idFRKCN1R321X-OFRTF>.

¹⁴ Paul Irwin Crookes, "Resetting EU–China Relations from a Values-Based to an Interests-Based Engagement", *op. cit.*, p. 646.

China while demanding compliance with certain EU standards, as emphasized by Feás & Steinberg.¹⁵

Therefore, the EU was and remains ready to “help” China to improve and to deepen their collaboration yet requiring Chinese to meet some of the EU standards. Geeraerts explains this posture by the role the EU gives itself to act as a normative actor in the international sphere instead of using “hard power”.¹⁶

Simultaneously, the growth of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in Europe and the establishment of the China-Central and Eastern European Countries Cooperation were perceived by European actors as indications of Chinese rising assertiveness and a direct threat to the EU's interests, as stated by Pavličević¹⁷ and by Josep Borell the High Representative of the European Union.¹⁸

After the publication of the strategic outlook, the EU implemented, in 2021, sanctions against China, freezing the assets and imposing a travel ban on four Chinese officials linked to the situation in Xinjiang and the rights of the Uyghur minority. In response, China swiftly imposed similar sanctions on ten European officials, including Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), and four organizations. Consequently, the European Parliament voted to suspend the ratification¹⁹ of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) between the EU and China²⁰, which was the culmination of many years of diplomatic efforts.

The EU's perception of China, before the 24th of February, was multifaceted and, at times, paradoxical. On one hand, there was concern about the "Chinese threat", as stressed by Pan²¹ and Pavličević²², and the negative perception of China's rise, both politically and economically, with

¹⁵ Enrique Feás and Federico Steinberg, “The EU–China Geo-Economic Equilibrium in a World of Uncertainty”, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Globalization with Chinese Characteristics: The Case of the Belt and Road Initiative*, ed. Paulo Afonso B. Duarte, Francisco José B. S. Leandro, and Enrique Martínez Galán (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2023), p. 344, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-6700-9_20.

¹⁶ Gustaaf Geeraerts, “China, the EU, and the New Multipolarity”, *European Review* 19, no. 1 (February 2011): pp. 62–63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798710000335>.

¹⁷ Dragan Pavličević, “Contesting China in Europe: Contextual Shift in China-EU Relations and the Role of ‘China Threat’”, in *The China Question*, ed. Dragan Pavličević and Nicole Talmacs (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2022), p. 87, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-9105-8_4.

¹⁸ Josep Borrell Fontelles, *The Year That War Returned To Europe* (Luxembourg: Publication Office of The European Union, 2023), p. 63, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/20230369_PDF_OF0323029ENN_002.pdf.

¹⁹ European Parliament, “MEPs Refuse Any Agreement with China Whilst Sanctions Are in Place”, May 20, 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210517IPR04123/meps-refuse-any-agreement-with-china-while-sanctions-are-in-place>.

²⁰ Daniel S. Hamilton, “CAI Is DOA”, *Asia Europe Journal* 20, no. 1 (March 2022): p. 66, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-021-00624-4>.

²¹ Chengxin Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics: Western Representations of China's Rise* (Cheltenham, UK ; Northampton, Massachusetts: Edward Elgar, 2012), pp. 66-73.

²² Dragan Pavličević, “Contesting China in Europe: Contextual Shift in China-EU Relations and the Role of ‘China Threat’”, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

its perceived instability. On the other hand, economic interests of both parties incentivized avoiding direct confrontation, as highlighted by Feás & Steinberg.²³

In 2019, the EU officially defined China as a "cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance."²⁴ This multifaceted definition reflects the intricacies of their relationship. On the other side, from the Chinese perspective, the EU was seen as facing various internal challenges, such as the financial crisis, the migrant crisis, the rise of populist parties, and Brexit, which have strained the bloc according to research conducted by Chang and Pieke.²⁵

The EU-China relationship was uneasy before the 24th of February 2022, with numerous points of tensions balanced with a clear understanding of their mutual economic interdependence. Pavličević stresses that "the EU is searching to calibrate rather than break its relationship with China, aware of the continuous importance of China to its economic fortunes".²⁶ Nevertheless, the Ukrainian conflict marks "watershed moment" for Europe as declared by Ursula von der Leyen,²⁷ with implications for its international relationships. Understanding the EU's perception of China's stance on the conflict is vital, considering the weight it carries in the current EU-PRC relationship.

This article analyzes different declarations from European leaders regarding China's position on the Ukrainian conflict. By examining official EU documents and speeches, the aim is to highlight key elements of discourse and the EU's perception of China's role in the crisis. The analysis will delve into four main elements of the EU's view on China (cooperation and negotiation, competitor, systemic rival) and assess how the Chinese proposal for a peace settlement may impact the relationship.

METHODOLOGY

To study the aftermath of the 24th of February 2022 on EU-Chinese relationships, we adopted an analysis approach focusing on primary sources comprising European representatives'

²³ Enrique Feás and Federico Steinberg, "The EU–China Geo-Economic Equilibrium in a World of Uncertainty", *op. cit.*, p. 338.

²⁴ European Commission, "EU-China Strategic Outlook: Commission and HR/VP Contribution to the European Council", accessed March 13, 2023, https://commission.europa.eu/publications/eu-china-strategic-outlook-commission-and-hrvp-contribution-european-council-21-22-march-2019_en.

²⁵ Vincent K. L. Chang and Frank N. Pieke, "Europe's Engagement with China: Shifting Chinese Views of the EU and the EU-China Relationship", *Asia Europe Journal* 16, no. 4 (December 1, 2018): p. 319, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-017-0499-9>.

²⁶ Dragan Pavličević, "Contesting China in Europe: Contextual Shift in China-EU Relations and the Role of 'China Threat'", *op. cit.*, p. 70.

²⁷ European Commission, "Statement by the President", *op. cit.*

discourses, press-releases, and official declarations. The selection of primary sources was carefully guided by their direct pertinence to the topic and the level of novelty they brought to the EU's positioning over China in the context of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict.

Given the ongoing nature of events in Ukraine and the continuous evolution of policy-making processes, the chosen primary sources were crucial in providing up-to-date and relevant insights. Our aim was to reflect the main elements of the European position on China regarding the Ukrainian conflict and to highlight the novel ideas and developments presented in the discourses and press-releases of European officials. To achieve this, we primarily focused on declarations made by key figures such as the President of the European Commission, Ursula Von Der Leyen, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and the High Representative and Vice-President of the European Union's external action, Josep Borrell. Additionally, we considered statements made by their spokespersons, press-releases, formal decisions, and documents published by the EU, directly related to China and/or the conflict in Ukraine, from the 24th of February 2022 until the end of March 2023.

Our comprehensive pool of primary sources comprised 192 publications made by the European Commission containing the word "China", 26 publications by the European Council, and 126 by the European External Action Service (EEAS) within the specified time frame. It is essential to acknowledge that while a majority of these publications may not have a direct link to the Ukrainian conflict, we meticulously analyzed each document to identify those that contributed significantly to our research by offering fresh insights into the EU's stance towards China.

Throughout the analysis, we sought to establish the EU's policy towards China in the aftermath of the conflict in Ukraine by gathering different declarations and documents published by the EU. This approach allowed us to unravel the complexities of the EU-China relationship during this critical period and understand how the events of the Ukrainian crisis influenced the EU's perception and positioning towards China.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE 24TH OF FEBRUARY ON EU-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

The Ukrainian crisis swiftly became a focal point in the relationship between the EU and the PRC, marking a “watershed moment”²⁸ for Europe, as stated by EU leaders. As the Russian

²⁸ European Commission, “Statement by the President”, *op. cit.*

troops entered Ukraine, the issue took center stage in the discussion between the EU and China during the first EU-China Summit held on the 1st of April 2022.

During this summit, the EU emphasized that halting Russia's unjustified and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, a sovereign country and a key EU partner, was its utmost priority and Ursula Von der Leyen further underscored that the Russian invasion not only defined the future of Europe but also shaped the EU's relationships with the rest of the world.²⁹ This reflects the critical importance of the Ukrainian conflict in shaping the EU's foreign policy and its interactions with other global partners.

From the official discourses and perceptions of the EU on China, the following key elements of the European discourse can be drawn:

THE CHINESE RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE EVENTS IN UKRAINE

In the European declarations on the Ukrainian conflict, a constant theme revolves around the call for China to shoulder its international responsibilities and take action to bring an end to the conflict. The EU-China Summit held following the Russian troops' entry into Ukraine exemplifies this stance, with the press release title emphasizing “EU-China Summit: Restoring peace and stability in Ukraine is a shared responsibility”.

Key EU leaders, such as Charles Michel, President of the European Council, stressed the need for major global powers like the EU and China to work together urgently to address the events in Ukraine. He also underscored the common responsibility of maintaining peace, stability, and a safe and sustainable world and Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, added that “China, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, has a special responsibility”.³⁰

This call for action from China is not new and is consistent with the EU-China Strategy Outlook of 2019, where the EU demanded Chinese responsibility in developing multilateralism

²⁹ European Council, “EU-China Summit: Restoring Peace and Stability in Ukraine Is a Shared Responsibility”, accessed March 14, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/04/01/eu-china-summit-restoring-peace-and-stability-in-ukraine-is-a-shared-responsibility/>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

within the United Nations (UN) and upholding its three pillars of Human Rights, Peace and Security, and Development.³¹

The EU's approach to China regarding the situation in Ukraine involves a twofold objective. Firstly, it recognizes China's significant role in international relations due to its growing global presence and its status as a permanent UN Security Council member with veto right. This recognition aims to establish an equilibrium between the EU and China as two powers sharing equal responsibilities in addressing international problems and conflicts. Secondly, the EU seeks China's active involvement on this specific issue, encouraging China to align its decisions with those of the EU.

By making such declarations, the EU intends to hold China, like any other country, accountable for its actions concerning the events in Ukraine and to abide by the rules of international law within the existing global order centered around the UN. While acknowledging the necessity for changes in the global order, the EU firmly upholds the ideal of a rule-based and institutionally governed international order,³² which has been fundamental to its approach to peace-building since the aftermath of the Second World War and the formation of the European Union.

Furthermore, holding China accountable based on its status and seat at the UN Security Council allows the EU to involve China in a conflict where it has been hesitant to take a decisive stance. The EU views the situation in Ukraine as a top priority and has urged its international partners to act in support of Ukraine. This strategy empowers the EU to set the global agenda, prompting responses and actions from other actors, and thus exerting influence in international affairs.

Throughout the period from the early days of the events in Ukraine from the 24th of February 2022 until March 2023, the EU has consistently called on China to fulfill its responsibilities and take concrete actions to address the situation.³³ This unwavering stance has reinforced the European message and might have yielded some results, as evidenced by China's proposal of principles for peace in Ukraine in early 2023. Importantly, while the EU emphasizes China's global responsibility as a major power with significant ties and leverage on Russia, it has

³¹ European Commission, "EU-China Strategic Outlook: Commission and HR/VP Contribution to the European Council", *op. cit.*

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

³³ Annex 1.

not directly blamed China for the events in Ukraine but rather called on China to fulfill its obligations within the international community.

In light of the four perceptions of China as a cooperation partner, negotiation partner, economic competitor, and systemic rival, the European Union's position, marked by its persistent calls on the PRC to embrace their "common responsibility" in resolving the conflict, can be interpreted as a cooperative and negotiating stance. The EU urged China to join the coalition in aiding Ukraine to bring an end to the conflict, effectively seeking alignment and cooperation between the two major powers.

THE EUROPEAN PRESSURE ON CHINA AND THE THREAT OF SANCTIONS

Alongside calling on China to take an active role in settling the conflict in Ukraine, the European leaders have also issued warnings of potential retaliation if China was to provide support to Russia. During the EU-China Summit, Ursula von der Leyen made it clear that "no European citizen would understand any support to Russia's ability to escalate the situation," while the official declaration further emphasized that "any attempts to circumvent sanctions or to aid Russia by other means must be stopped."³⁴

The EU, together with its American allies, has urged China not to extend any form of aid or military support to Russia amidst the conflict. As the European leaders have asked China to play a proactive role in resolving the Ukrainian situation, they have also swiftly called upon China not to act in favor of Russia.

From the early stages of the conflict, there were concerns that China might provide concrete military, economic, financial, or technological assistance to Russia, especially as Russia faced significant sanctions aimed at halting the conflict. The pressure placed on China is attributed to its perceived neutrality in the European narrative and positioning on the Ukrainian conflict. For the President of the European Commission, "Nobody can remain neutral when faced with such blatant aggression against civilians," thus urging China to adopt a clear stance on the conflict.³⁵

³⁴ European Council, "EU-China Summit: Restoring Peace and Stability in Ukraine Is a Shared Responsibility", *op. cit.*

³⁵ European Commission, "Speech by the President on the Conclusions of the EUCO", accessed March 24, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_2321.

Many view Chinese neutrality as pro-Kremlin, including Peter Stano, a spokesperson of the European Commission, who suggested that China's stance aligns it with Russia by placing Ukraine and Russia on the same level and echoing some of Russia's narratives about the conflict.³⁶ Consequently, from the European perspective, China's failure to take a definitive position in support of Ukraine explains the EU's decision to exert pressure on China.

The European position can be analyzed through two lenses:

Firstly, the EU and its western allies took decisive actions against Russia, exerting significant political, economic, and financial power, and investing considerable credibility in developing and enforcing sanctions. These measures involved freezing Russian assets, implementing export and import bans on major segments of the Russian economy, including oil & gas and fertilizers, as well as imposing restrictions on the movement and actions of Russian individuals. The enforcement of sanctions was a massive undertaking, and Western countries made extensive efforts to persuade other nations to enact sanctions against Russia,³⁷ though the response was not as comprehensive as hoped, with most third countries choosing not to impose sanctions.³⁸

One crucial aspect of the financial sanctions was the restrictions placed on Russian banks, which involved highly limiting measures and extraterritorial application. This meant that not only did Western nations restrict their own banks from conducting business with Russia, but they also imposed limitations on third countries that used dollars, euros, or the Swift system when dealing with Russia. Compliance by third countries was pivotal in the effectiveness of these restrictions, as any incomplete implementation could be easily countered by Russia and its friendly countries.

This context helps explain the EU's call for countries, including China, not to provide direct or indirect support to Russia, which could potentially circumvent the sanctions. Given China's status as one of Russia's most important economic partners, particularly after the events of February 24th, it became a key focus of European attention regarding the enforcement of sanctions, especially considering China's significant role in the Russian economy and its provision of substitutes for Western components.

Another indirect measure that Western countries imposed on China was a price cap on oil products from Russia, which was indiscriminately applied to any third country purchasing Russian oil. Utilizing their dominant position in the insurance brokering for oil tankers (covering 95% of

³⁶ Annex 1.

³⁷ European Commission, "Statement by the President", *op. cit.*

³⁸ Reuters, "Tracking Sanctions against Russia", March 9, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/UKRAINE-CRISIS/SANCTIONS/byvrjenzmve/>.

the market)³⁹, Western countries compelled insurance and financial brokers based within their borders to insure tankers transporting Russian oil, but only under the condition that they adhered to the price cap of \$60 per barrel of crude oil.⁴⁰ This measure was specifically targeted at third countries since Western countries themselves had banned the importation of Russian oil. Although this measure could be perceived as beneficial to third countries, providing more room for negotiation with Russia for a lower price, it also impinged on their sovereignty as the decision was imposed on them. Given China's significant imports of Russian oil, this measure directly affected the PRC, and the EU sought to ensure that the sanctions and decisions it had taken were fully respected.

Secondly, in the wake of the events on February 24th, the EU massively supported Ukraine in its fight with Russia, providing substantial military aid, financial assistance, and political backing. The EU demonstrated unwavering commitment to Ukraine's cause and called on other countries to show similar support, even though the results of this call were not as fruitful as desired. Nonetheless, the EU and its allies continued to exert pressure on other countries, seeking to maintain credibility in their engagement with Ukraine and their reputation as countries capable of influencing others.

This political pressure became evident through the EU's call on China to leverage its influence on Russia and play a responsible role on the global stage, adhering to the principles of the UN Charter.⁴¹ These actions by the Europeans may have influenced China's subsequent proposal regarding the situation in Ukraine, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Given the four different stances on China and the calls for the PRC to refrain from supporting Russia, along with the threat of sanctions, this situation implies a sense of competition and the potential for rivalry between the two actors. The assertive nature of the European declarations leaves little space for negotiation or cooperation, and any rivalry that might arise from Chinese assistance to Russia could significantly strain EU-China relations.

³⁹ Timothy Gardner, "Explainer: The G7's Price Cap on Russian Oil Begins to Take Shape", *Reuters*, September 12, 2022, sec. Energy, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/g7s-price-cap-russian-oil-begins-take-shape-2022-09-12/>.

⁴⁰ European Council, "EU Sanctions against Russia Explained", March 15, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/>.

⁴¹ European Council, "EU-China Summit: Restoring Peace and Stability in Ukraine Is a Shared Responsibility", *op. cit.*

THE CHINESE PEACE SETTLEMENT PRINCIPLES: NOT FIT FOR THE ROLE

On February 24th, 2023, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis",⁴² which has been viewed by some as the Chinese Peace plan for Ukraine or as a mere declaration of Chinese principles to negotiate an end to the conflict. The European response to the Chinese document can be described as moderate. Josep Borell, on his personal page on the EEAS' site, commented on the Chinese proposal, stating that it is not truly a peace plan and mostly reiterates well-known Chinese positions, some of which the EU shares, while crucial elements are missing as "it does not really distinguish aggressor from the victim, putting the parties at an equal level".⁴³ Borell's criticism has been echoed by other EU officials⁴⁴ and emphasizes the EU's insistence on differentiating between Russia and Ukraine in its approach to the conflict.

The EU has criticized China's position and its relationship with Russia, which undermines the credibility of the Chinese proposal and positions the PRC as a partial actor in the conflict.⁴⁵ Josep Borell proposed that the UN General Assembly votes over the conflict and the peace proposal from the Ukrainian President serve as the basis for negotiations to end the conflict.⁴⁶ This approach by the EU suggests a continuation of the multilateral approach the Europeans have pursued, with a constant call for respecting the UN Charter and ensuring Ukraine's full territorial integrity as the only path to resolving the conflict. This approach demands the complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine, the return of all annexed territories, the trial of Russian officials for alleged war crimes and human rights violations, and reparations for the destruction caused during the conflict, in favor of Ukraine.⁴⁷

While the Chinese principles do include respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity as core principles, the proposal is not entirely aligned with the EU's approach. China calls for abandoning the Cold War mentality, stating that "the security of a country should not be pursued at the expense of others." The document also criticizes unilateral sanctions imposed by some countries, without explicitly mentioning them, though it is evident that Western countries,

⁴² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis", accessed March 13, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html.

⁴³ EEAS, "The World Is Demanding a Just Peace for Ukraine", accessed March 14, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/world-demanding-just-peace-ukraine_en.

⁴⁴ Annex 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ EEAS, "The World Is Demanding a Just Peace for Ukraine", *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ European Commission, "Speech by President von Der Leyen on Bucha's Liberation", accessed March 31, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2086.

including the EU, are being referred to. China "opposes unilateral sanctions unauthorized by the UN Security Council. Relevant countries should stop abusing unilateral sanctions and 'long-arm jurisdiction' against other countries, so as to do their share in deescalating the Ukraine crisis."⁴⁸

This Chinese proposal serves as a criticism of Western behavior towards the conflict in Ukraine and their policies with respect to third countries. As mentioned earlier, the sanctions affecting China exemplify what might be seen as a paradox in the EU's sanction policy, as the EU emphasizes multilateralism based on the rule of international law of the UN. Yet, the sanctions imposed on Russia and the various extraterritorial restrictions were enforced without a vote from the UN Security Council, which is the only international forum authorized to implement such sanctions on a global scale. In contrast, UN General Assembly (UNGA) decisions are not binding. By pointing out these sanctions and restrictions not approved at the UN level, China highlights a contradiction in the EU's discourse, potentially compromising some European principles.

However, according to Josep Borrell, the PRC has not yet crossed any "red line" on the Ukrainian conflict, a view positively perceived by the Europeans. The fact that China's peace proposal demonstrates a divergence from Russia's stance suggests that discussions with China should continue.⁴⁹

The EU's cautious approach to the Chinese proposal leaves room for negotiation, and thus far, no point of no return has been reached in the EU-China relationship regarding the Ukrainian conflict. In his yearly book, Josep Borrell described China's position on the conflict as "pro-Russia neutrality" and added that the EU-China political outlooks are increasingly divergent, despite the growing economic ties between the two.⁵⁰

Regarding the four stances, the Chinese principles for peace in Ukraine do not completely align with the EU's expectations for conflict resolution. Some crucial elements are absent, and there are indirect criticisms of the EU's stance, resulting in a competitive approach to addressing and resolving the conflict. However, it is noteworthy that China has not crossed any "red lines" regarding the conflict, and the proposal does not entirely align with the Russian narrative. This leaves room for potential negotiation and discussion between the EU and China.

⁴⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis", *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ Reuters, "EU's Borrell: Russia-China Partnership Has Limits", March 24, 2023, sec. World, <https://www.reuters.com/world/eus-borrell-russia-china-partnership-has-limits-2023-03-24/>.

⁵⁰ Josep Borrell Fontelles, *The Year That War Returned To Europe*, *op. cit.*, pp. 63–65.

A CHINA THAT DOES NOT PLAY THE EUROPEAN GAME OVER UKRAINE

As described earlier, the PRC appears to be pursuing its own course in Ukraine, not fully aligning with the Russian narrative and military operation in the region, but also not actively responding to the EU's call for strong condemnation and support for Ukraine. As analyzed by Borrell, China seems to perceive an opportunity in the conflict, with the West focused on Ukraine and a weakened Russia, allowing China to position itself as the senior partner, offering cheap oil and gas as Europe reduces its energy imports from Russia.⁵¹

Currently, tensions between the EU and China are growing on various international issues, including concerns about human rights, market access, and Chinese assertiveness in Southeast Asia. These differences in perception have already contributed to a sense of “stalemate and divergence”⁵² in the relationship between the two major powers. The conflict in Ukraine has become an additional point of contention for the EU-China relationship.

For Europe, February 24th remains a defining moment, as the EU sees the conflict not only as an intra-European issue but also as having global resonance, affecting its relationships with other foreign actors.⁵³ The EU perceives China's stance as "pro-Russian neutrality," evident in its abstention on key votes related to the Ukrainian conflict at the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly. Borrell acknowledges that China is not actively working to end the conflict in Ukraine, and the best the EU can realistically hope for is that China does not take a more active pro-Russian stance.⁵⁴

The EU acknowledges that China is not playing the game it wanted, as China did not join the EU's efforts to pressure Russia and swiftly resolve the crisis. Instead, China maintains its "neutrality", pursuing its own interests and maintaining friendly relations with Russia, as demonstrated by President Xi Jinping's visit to Russia in March 2023. Despite this, the EU keeps the door open for talks with China, as Borrell stated that no "red lines" have been crossed. The EU is still open to considering China as a potential "facilitator" rather than a "mediator" in the conflict, depending on how the situation evolves.⁵⁵

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 63–65.

⁵³ European Commission, “EU-China Summit”, accessed March 24, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_2214.

⁵⁴ Josep Borrell Fontelles, *The Year That War Returned To Europe*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁵⁵ Reuters, “EU’s Borrell”, *op. cit.*

The EU's approach towards China remains rooted in its core principles and the pursuit of respect for fundamental values in its international policy. The EU aims to "shape China's choices"⁵⁶ and, in its dialogue with China, seeks to speak the language of power.⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the EU-China relationship in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis can be viewed through the lens of the four developed categories by the European Union: cooperation partner, negotiating partner, economic competitor, and systemic rival.

As the article concludes, it is evident that the EU and China do not share the same objectives regarding the Ukrainian conflict, and the current state of their relationship does not align well with a cooperation partnership on this particular topic.

Since the events of February 24th, there have been no significant negotiations between the two parties concerning the conflict's outcome or their respective positions. The EU has even issued a threat of retaliation if China provides support to Russia, while China, as presented by the Europeans, has shown reluctance to engage in discussions about the Ukrainian case or any potential challenges in their relationship during the EU-China summit in 2022.⁵⁸

Although there is no direct economic competition between the EU and China in the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, there is a competition in terms of their perception of the conflict and its resolution. The EU advocates for resolutions from the UN General Assembly and President Zelensky's peace plan, coupled with sanctions and trials for Russian officials. On the other hand, China's proposal differs in some aspects and criticizes Western sanctions and the "Cold War" rhetoric.

The systemic rivalry between the EU and China is less evident, and the EU has recently tempered such discourses. While the Chinese proposal weakens the EU's position, it does not make China a clear rival in the conflict. China maintains neutrality in the eyes of the EU, although the EU perceives China's stance as "pro-Russia neutrality." Moreover, China is not directly or indirectly involved in the battlefields of Ukraine or its weapons, maintaining consistent calls for de-escalation, ceasefire, and peace talks.

⁵⁶ EEAS, "On China's Choices and Responsibilities", accessed March 29, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/china%E2%80%99s-choices-and-responsibilities_en.

⁵⁷ Josep Borrell Fontelles, *The Year That War Returned To Europe*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁵⁸ EEAS, "EU-China Summit: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP Plenary", accessed March 29, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-china-summit-speech-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-ep-plenary_en.

Despite the significant difference in perspectives over the conflict in Ukraine, the two actors have not fully confronted each other. The EU recognizes the rising autonomy of China as an international actor but also expects it to bear the responsibilities of a major power that upholds human rights and follows the UN Charter. China's divergence from Western calls for action in the Ukrainian conflict is seen as challenging by the EU.

The 24th of February and its ensuing crisis have solidified China's independent perspective, capable of navigating its interests while not adhering to Western demands. The competition between the EU and China is intensified by their indirect support for opposing sides in the conflict. However, open rivalry has not materialized, as China has not fully aligned with Russia, and both sides have maintained their respective positions.

The Ukrainian crisis highlights a broader trend in EU-China relations on other international issues, where the EU seeks to calibrate its relationship with China rather than break it off, recognizing China's continued economic importance as stressed by Pavličević.⁵⁹ On this particular topic, the von der Leyen's comment that "how China continues to interact with Putin's war will be a determining factor for EU-China relations going forward"⁶⁰ concludes that the Ukrainian crisis could remain an important thorn in the side of EU-China relationships.

Finally, this study is limited by two factors. First, Europe's international relationships go beyond the official position of the European Union, and individual member states may have different public policies. Second, the Ukrainian crisis is ongoing, and the situation may change in the coming months and years. This article provides an overview one year after the conflict began and could serve as a foundation for further research on the topic.

⁵⁹ Dragan Pavličević, "Contesting China in Europe: Contextual Shift in China-EU Relations and the Role of 'China Threat'", *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁶⁰ European Commission, "Speech by the President on EU-China Relations," accessed March 30, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2063.

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ANNEX 1

Transcript of the Peter Stano comment on the Chinese peace proposal, minute 41:25 of the midday press briefing of the European Commission of the 13th of March 2023⁶¹:

One element you mention is really important, you can be an honest peace broker when you don't take sides. When it comes to the Russian-Ukraine conflict, China is actually taking sides. China is refusing to recognise who is the aggressor and who is the victim. China is putting at the same level Ukraine , which is under brutal and illegal attack, in violation of the UN charter. Exactly the same charter which China is supposed to protect as a permanent member of the security council. This is already something that is debatable in the Chinese attitude and its proposal.

Secondly, China is not really deflecting from the Russian misleading narrative of this aggression. Sometimes, multiplying and echoing the Russian reasons about the so-called genocide and enlargement by NATO and similar non-sens.

So, if you want to broke peace, everyone is welcome but, first, you have to be accepted by the 2 parties involved. We have seen so far that Russia has been really cold and ignorant to any meaningful peace proposal. Instead, Russia is escalating in its atrocities against the Ukrainian population and Ukrainian civilian infrastructure but, of course, any country is welcome to do as much as they can to bring peace because peace is urgently needed and whoever can exercise their pressure on Russia should do so so Russia stops this inhuman illegal aggression as soon as possible. And China has the leverage as a permanent member of the UN security council.

⁶¹ European Commission, "Midday Press Briefing from 13/03/2023", accessed March 14, 2023, <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-238765>.

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