

The U.S.-Chinese Strategic Competition and the Ukraine War: Implications for Asian-Pacific Security

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ABSTRACT

Against the background of the intensified U.S.-Chinese strategic competition in recent years, this paper examines the implications of the Ukraine war for security in the Asia-Pacific. Based on a qualitative analysis of hundreds of governmental documents, speeches and news articles, the study finds that both the United States and China have exploited the Ukraine war to double down on their strategic rivalry in the Asia-Pacific. The Biden administration has cast China and Russia as similar threats to the international order; intertwined Europe's problems with those of the Asia-Pacific; and pursued a global anti-authoritarian alliance directed against both Russia and China. China has become an increasingly uninhibited security-seeker as it has recognized its own rapidly deteriorating security situation; America's resolve to maintain its China policy; and a unique strategic moment in which to present itself globally as an anti-hegemonic, responsible great power. Given these developments, the security situation in the Asia-Pacific is becoming ever more volatile.

KEYWORDS

U.S.-China relations; Asia-Pacific; Ukraine war; China; United States; security policy; Russia; strategic competition

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INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, the rise of China to great power status has received staggering attention. Scholars have debated whether China rises peacefully as a status-quo power, or more violently as a challenger of the U.S.-led liberal international order (ALLAN ET AL. 2018; JOHNSTON 2019). They have examined all facets of the economic, technological, cultural and political competition in the Asia-Pacific and beyond (SHAMBAUGH 2018; STEINBOCK 2018), tried to sketch out the contours of a Sino-centric regional and global order (LAYNE 2018; WANG – MENG 2020; X. WU 2018), or traced how China's neighbours have adjusted to U.S.-China relations in the region (ENVALL – WILKINS 2022; SINGH 2022A; WILKINS – KIM 2022).

With the deterioration of the U.S.-China relations in the mid-2010s – signified by the recognition of China as America's “*strategic competitor*” in the 2017 U.S. *National Security Strategy* – the Asia-Pacific region's general prospects for war, peace and prosperity have seen intensified interest (SCHREER 2019; SINGH 2022B), and scholars have debated whether the United States and China are in the midst of a new Cold War (LAYNE 2020; WESTAD 2019; ZHAO 2019), or even destined for war (ALLISON 2017; HE 2022; ZHANG – PU 2019). In short, both policymakers and scholars alike have become preoccupied with the United States and China as key actors in global politics, and the Asia-Pacific as the region where an interstate war might emerge sooner or later. By mid-February 2022, both the United States and China had made significant progress in terms of shifting their foreign policy objectives and priorities to respond to the realities of the intense rivalry in the Asia-Pacific.

Against this background, the invasion of Ukraine at the end of February 2022 has turned all eyes to Russia as a key offender of international norms and rules, and Europe as the unlikely stage of a brutal war that has displaced millions. As a watershed moment of the post-Cold War era, the purpose of this article is to ask: How does the Ukraine war affect the strategic competition between the United States and China, and what are the implications for the Asia-Pacific? To answer this question, the article first examines in depth how the United States and China have tried to shift their foreign and security policy in a new geopolitical era of bilateral rivalry on the eve of Russia's invasion. The article then traces both

countries' responses to the Ukraine war during 2022, which is followed by a discussion of the implications for security in the Asia-Pacific.

The article is broadly grounded in analytical eclecticism and thus eschews strict adherence to any given research tradition as a way to appreciate the different, interconnected driving forces of foreign policy, and advance a pragmatic understanding of knowledge-generation (KATZENSTEIN – SIL 2008). As such, while the article principally focuses on the United States and China as the main actors who respond to geopolitical events based on an assessment of their short- and long-term interests (including state survival), the analysis also incorporates other potentially relevant factors in the formulation of foreign policy, including the roles of institutions, beliefs, domestic politics, and strategic narratives. The advantage of such an approach is that it allows the article to foreground deep empirical analysis rather than theoretical complexity; however, some theoretical parsimony is lost in the process. The material for this analysis was collected during the course of 2022 and consists of hundreds of governmental materials (speeches, statements, documents) from official governmental websites (e.g., the White House, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MOFA]), in addition to secondary sources such as news articles reporting on presidential overseas trips, interviews or other relevant events. Most of the material is from 2021 and 2022, which corresponds to the time frame of the investigation.

Based on a qualitative analysis of the collected documents, the article argues that although the Ukraine war might in principle have eased the tensions in the Asia-Pacific as the new flashpoint in Europe demanded undivided attention, the war and its handling by the United States and China have exacerbated their security dilemma in the Asia-Pacific. In terms of the United States' response to the war, the article finds that the Biden administration's basic strategy is to support Ukraine while maintaining its focus on China as America's "*priority theatre*" (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE 2022A). Central to this approach is the promotion of strategic narratives that portray Europe's present as Asia's future, Russia and China as similar threats to peace and global order, and Ukraine and Taiwan as similar victims. In the short run, doing so has allowed the Biden administration to craft an anti-authoritarian coalition with both its European and Asia-Pacific partners that might be activated both in Europe and in

the Asia-Pacific. Yet, the sustainability of this approach is questionable while it antagonizes China further.

In terms of China's response to the war, the article finds that China has initially tried to assume a non-committal, non-confrontational profile. While China officially proclaims its neutrality, its position has emerged as a complex mixture of words and deeds that oscillate between support for Russia, Ukraine, Europe, and, to a more limited degree, also the United States. Doing so has allowed China much flexibility. Yet, it has also impeded any chance for it to emerge as a constructive party to the crisis, and proved to many in the United States and Europe that China was an unreliable great power with little interest in upholding international law and order. As the war continued, China came to realize that its security was rapidly deteriorating as U.S. efforts to craft an anti-authoritarian coalition advanced. As a response, China has become an increasingly uninhibited actor in pursuit of security. Yet, by trying to counteract the effects of Biden's coalition by strengthening its anti-hegemonic partnerships with countries in the Global South, further deepening its relationship with Russia, and encouraging European efforts to develop a more independent foreign policy, China also further reinforces the impression in the United States that China is indeed a malign actor bent on remaking the international order.

In terms of the implications for the Asia-Pacific, both the United States and China's response to the Ukraine war is likely to further hasten the security dilemma in the region as both states have doubled-down on their efforts to be able to confront each other in the foreseeable future, while showing limited interest in stabilizing their bilateral relations so that they would become a *modus vivendi*. In short, the Asia-Pacific region is becoming increasingly volatile not *despite* the Ukraine war in Europe, but *because* of it.

ON THE EVE OF THE UKRAINE WAR: THE U.S.-CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

All eyes on China: The Biden administration's pursuit of strategic competition

Even though President Joe Biden reverted many of the policies launched under Donald J. Trump upon assuming office in 2021, the China policy emerged as one of the few areas of continuity between them as his administration agreed that the United States had to seriously overhaul its China policy and recognize China for the serious competitor that it was, rather than reverting back to the engagement policy of previous decades (SUTTER 2022). Indeed, on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the end of February 2022, the United States had made major progress in terms of reorganizing its foreign and defence priorities to respond to the task of "strategic competition" with the "pacing threat" of China (THE WHITE HOUSE 2021C; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE 2021).

Specifically, the Biden administration adopted a three-pronged approach centered on the themes of *competition*, *confrontation* and *cooperation* with China, all the while emphasizing America's allies and partners as a central element of any successful management of China (THE WHITE HOUSE 2021B; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2021B). Out of these three themes, the progress in *cooperation* ("where necessary") has been largely limited to climate change, where the United States and China agreed they were "committed to cooperating with each other and with other countries to tackle the climate crisis" (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2021G), but otherwise failed to agree on specific provisions. In terms of *competition*, the Biden administration has focused on strengthening America's economic competitiveness, such as through infrastructure or research and development expenditure. The original 'American Jobs plan', for instance, was justified as "an investment in America that will create millions of good jobs, build our country's infrastructure, and position the United States to out-compete China" (THE WHITE HOUSE 2021D; DESIDERIO 2022). Moreover, Biden has sought to strengthen the resilience of democracy at home and abroad "against the backdrop of a rise in authoritarianism and increasing threats to democracy around the world" (THE WHITE HOUSE 2021E), such as by calling a "summit of democracies" (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2021A), or trying to "rally the world's democracies" (BIDEN 2021). The Biden administration

has also *confronted* unfair Chinese trade practices, espionage and human rights violations through tariffs, sanctions and condemnation, and has pushed against China's behavior in the South and East China Sea by conducting the Freedom of Navigation Operations, joint military exercises with partners, and weapon sales to Taiwan, and equipping Australia with nuclear-powered submarines (LARTER 2021; MIGLANI 2020; THE WHITE HOUSE 2021F; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE 2021; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2021E, 2021F, 2021H; WANG 2022).

In terms of Biden's emphasis on alliances and partners, Biden has sought to restore trust in America's commitment to its partners and worked towards persuading America's partners to share his understanding of China as a strategic competitor that should be faced through strong alliances. Although the message was reiterated across various occasions (BIDEN 2021; SONNE – BIRNBAUM 2021; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2021C, 2021D), the progress prior to the Ukraine war had been relatively slow as America's partners were hesitant to antagonize China due to their economic vulnerabilities; their preference for and trust in dialogue, cooperation and trade as means to secure amicable relations with China; as well as their doubts regarding the sustainability of America's commitments, especially in the light of the 2024 presidential elections (CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE 2021; LEVY – RÉVÉSZ 2021; NIELSEN – DIMITROVA 2021; SATORU 2021). Moreover, despite Biden's reassurances, the Biden administration has also made several important foreign policy decisions without either consulting or notifying its partners first, including, for instance, the launch of AUKUS, a trilateral security agreement between the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia which irritated its other European partners (FRENCH MINISTRY FOR EUROPE AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS 2021; THE WHITE HOUSE 2021F).

In total, what has become clear since early 2021 is that Biden does not shy away from difficult, controversial and potentially costly decisions to ensure America's ability to compete with China, and that such an objective can overrule other concerns, including those of allies and partners. The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 is a case in point. The Biden administration hoped that moving out of the Middle East would free up resources, enabling the United States to finally properly pivot to the Asia-Pacific. As Biden justified the messy withdrawal (which negatively surprised the US's allies since they had not been notified in advance), "*our true strategic competitors – China and Russia*

– *would love nothing more than the United States to continue to funnel billions of dollars in resources and attention into stabilizing Afghanistan indefinitely*

(THE WHITE HOUSE 2021E).

Rising in a new era: China adjusts to strategic competition

China, in the meanwhile, has also started to adjust to the realities of its intense rivalry with the United States in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. For decades, the stability of the U.S.-China relations had been a central concern for Chinese policymakers as it was seen as pivotal to safeguarding China's undeterred rise, which, in turn, underpinned the regime's stability. However, with the deterioration of the bilateral relations since around 2016, China realized that it could no longer count on an environment favorable to its development and security (WANG 2021; ZUO 2021). Publicly, Chinese diplomats continued to emphasize mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and a win-win cooperation as the only way forward in the U.S.-China relation, rejected any "*Cold War mentality*" and criticized the "*China threat*" thesis as overblown since China, its intentions and interests were misunderstood or mischaracterized by the West (MOFA 2020B, 2021A, 2021B; WU 2021).

In practice, however, China began to prepare for an increasingly volatile security environment where "*long-term struggle*" was required to realize China's dream of national rejuvenation (XINHUA NEWS 2019; ZUO 2021). To maintain its defense and security interests, China continued with the modernization of its armed forces, further increased its military expenditure and pledged to "*safeguard China's overseas interests*", including, for instance, a secure energy supply (CHINESE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE 2019; SAUNDERS 2020). China predominantly relied on displays of strength, grey-zone tactics or belligerent rhetoric to intimidate its competitors, and all of these practices have intensified in recent years: It has increased its patrols in contested waters, expanded the mandate for its Coast Guard, frequently conducted military exercises, and clarified right after Biden's inauguration that "*Taiwan independence means wars*" (XINHUA NEWS 2021; CHINA MILITARY ONLINE 2021; LIU ET AL. 2021; RUDD 2021).

To maintain its steady economic development, China has begun a process of economic and technological decoupling from the U.S. market. The trade war instigated by Trump had made it abundantly clear that the Chinese market was vulnerable to sanctions and tariffs, and

that Chinese companies, for instance Huawei, might be denied access to sensitive sectors (ZUO 2021). For this reason, the 14th Five-Year Plan contained detailed proposals to strengthen economic security through increased self-sufficiency, secure supply lines or energy security (PEI 2021). At the same time, China has repeatedly emphasized its commitment to multilateralism and free trade, often in direct juxtaposition to Biden's more exclusionary club of democracies, or Trump's scepticism regarding globalization (CGTN 2021A). Aside from its Belt and Road Initiative, a wide-ranging economic development scheme which had been a centrepiece of Chinese foreign policy since 2013, China champions the 'Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership', a broad free-trade agreement for the Asia-Pacific, as a "victory for the region" (ZHANG 2022), and continues to push for a far-ranging investment agreement with the European Union (CHINESE EMBASSY IN THE UNITED STATES 2021).

As its relations with the United States have deteriorated amid strategic competition, China has also more proactively sought to improve and deepen its partnerships with other countries to avoid international isolation (KIM 2021). For instance, China has encouraged Europe's 'strategic autonomy' in various statements (CHINESE EMBASSY IN THE UNITED STATES 2021, MOFA 2020A), lifted its relations with Africa into a 'new era' (MOFA 2021C) and sought to thaw its relations with Japan and South Korea (HUSSAIN 2020; WANG - ZANG 2021). Perhaps most striking, in early 2022, China has further deepened its strategic partnership with Russia so that it is now considered a friendship with 'no limits' (RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL EXECUTIVE OFFICE 2022).

China has thus become increasingly confident in the pursuit of its national interests as it believes in the inevitability of its rise as a great power (SEE ALSO ECONOMY 2020). While the stability of the U.S.-China relations once anchored and oriented China's foreign policy behaviour, now, China's main objective is to prepare for an intense military and economic rivalry with America in the intermediate future. At the same time, China continues to emphasize dialogue. Doing so allows China to point to the United States as the culprit who escalates the tensions in their relations. Moreover, the notion that China needs to still grow stronger so that it can hold up against the United States continues to orient Chinese security policy as it has no interest in prematurely engaging in any conflict.

In sum, by mid-February 2022, both the United States and China had made significant progress in terms of adjusting to the realities of their strategic competition. The United States finally had significant support for a tougher China policy across political divides, was no longer bogged down in other regions and could thus give China its undivided attention. China, on the other hand, had accepted that the age of cooperation had given way to a new era of great power competition, and made great headway in terms of adjusting accordingly. Arguably, by the time that Russia invaded Ukraine, the Asia-Pacific had become a volatile region prone to conflicts driven by the strategic competition between the United States and China.

THE UKRAINE WAR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S.-CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 turned the world's attention squarely back to Europe. In so far as the strategic competition between the United States and China had been a key factor driving the worsening of the security landscape of the Asia-Pacific, the Ukraine war offered the promise of a reprieve for the region as both the United States and China had to divert their attention to Europe. In fact, some commentators suggested that the Ukraine war offered a unique window of opportunity to mend the U.S.-China bilateral relations as the war clarified that Russia was the more severe security threat to the global order, that the U.S.-China cooperation was key to bringing a resolution to the war, and that China could demonstrate its willingness as a responsible great power to upkeep the international order. The restoration of the U.S.-China relations would in turn bring much-needed stability to the world, and in particular the Asia-Pacific (HIRSH 2022; JIA 2022; KARABELL 2022; ROACH 2022; SHIRK 2022; YANG 2022). Other commentators took the exact opposite position, and argued that the attention to Ukraine and the encouragement of the U.S.-China cooperation were dangerous for global order and peace, but in particular for U.S. security, as China would inevitably exploit the vacuum and further expand its reach while the United States is distracted (CHOTINER 2022; COLBY 2022; COLBY – MASTRO 2022; NAKAYAMA 2022; WALT 2022).

In practice, both America and China's responses to the Ukraine war have fallen somewhere in-between these poles, and are now discussed in turn.

The Biden administration: Choosing not to choose

The first few months of the Ukraine war have clarified that the United States is unwilling to revert or postpone its China policy so as to be able to do fully focus on Ukraine, even if it had early on tried to enlist China's help to dissuade Putin from the invasion (WONG 2022A). Yet, Biden's reputation as a transatlanticist with a strong commitment to democracy, the rule of law, institutions and human rights has also meant that abandoning Europe for the sake of his China policy was politically just as impossible.

Instead, the Biden administration decided to involve itself in the Ukraine crisis while making it clear that its main focus remained on the Asia-Pacific. The Department of Defense called the Asia-Pacific its 'priority theatre' and clarified that America's priority was "*deterring aggression, while being prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary, [and] prioritizing the PRC challenge in the Asia-Pacific, [and] then the Russia challenge in Europe*" (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE 2022A, 2022B). The State Department likewise reassured its audiences that the United States was "*capable [...] of walking and chewing gum at the same time*" and could hence focus on Europe and the Asia-Pacific simultaneously (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2022; BLINKEN 2022; GERMAN MARSHALL FUND OF THE UNITED STATES).

In order to implement such an approach, the Biden administration has promoted strategic narratives that weave both regions into one intertwined policy issue, and advertised this line of argumentation throughout various statements and speeches. As a senior administration official suggested, "*the idea that these are two different theatres I think doesn't make sense anymore. These are – there's [sic] very strong linkages between both*" (THE WHITE HOUSE 2022). This approach is built on the portrayal of Russia's war as that of an authoritarian aggressor against the rules-based international order. While the transgression happened in Europe, neither Russia's aggression nor Ukraine's anguish is idiosyncratic, and they can in principle happen anywhere anytime – unless the West responds strongly. As several joint statements with allies and partners emphasize, "*threats to international law and the free and fair economic order anywhere constitute a challenge to our values and interests everywhere*" (E.G. THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY PROJECT 2022C), and are challenges which "*call for common purpose and action, across the Atlantic and the Pacific*" (THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY PROJECT 2022D). Hence, "[f]rom

the Atlantic to the Pacific, we must all redouble efforts to support Ukraine and preserve a world in which borders cannot be changed by force" (THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY PROJECT 2022A).

Without directly equating China with Russia, both countries are thus cast as similar threats to global peace and order. The implicit equation of Ukraine's situation with that of Taiwan also underpins this line of argumentation. As Biden argues in a thinly veiled reference to China and Taiwan, delivering weapons to Ukraine is crucial because it would otherwise "send a message to other would-be aggressors that they too can seize territory and subjugate other countries" (BIDEN 2022). Russia may have been the first to strike, but the challenge of China to the rules-based international order is equally grave, and perhaps even more so given the preponderance of China's military and economic power. In the words of State Secretary Blinken (2022), "China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it." Particularly concerning in this context is the ongoing deepening of China and Russia's relationship, which key officials of the administration emphasize repeatedly (AFP NEWS 2021A; CAMPBELL 2022).

To further entangle Europe and the Asia-Pacific, the administration often praised the support of its Asia-Pacific partners in Europe. Senior administration officials, for instance, noted "how impressed [the President] is by what the ROK has done" (THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY PROJECT 2022B), and that the United States appreciates the "unprecedented level of engagement from Asian partners into the European theater" (CAMPBELL 2022; THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY PROJECT 2022A). Likewise, the long-awaited elucidation of the administration's approach to the People's Republic of China lauds how "so many countries have united to oppose [Russia's] aggression" (BLINKEN 2022).

In short, the gist of such narratives is that because Europe's present can quickly become Asia's future, a resolute response from the United States and its allies and partners against authoritarian aggression everywhere is pivotal for global peace and prosperity. In other words, the Biden administration actively works towards creating a coalition spanning its partners both in Europe and in the Asia-Pacific against Russia, and orienting its focus also against the threat from China.

In principle, the Biden administration could gain much from a commitment to both Ukraine and China: Ideally, the Ukraine war has shocked the world, and in particular, Europe, into recognizing that geopolitical threats to global peace and prosperity are not a thing of the past, that engagement and trade with Russia had done little to prevent the invasion, and that Europe was long overdue to take on more responsibility for its defense. Indeed, the more partners and allies understand Russia and China as similar threats, the more likely it becomes that America could succeed in crafting a joint China policy with them, which is something that the European partners had been hesitant with before. Similarly, trust in America's commitments to its partners, which had suffered in the wake of AUKUS and the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, could be restored, while the solidarity of the Asia-Pacific nations with Europe in terms of security would hopefully also set a precedence for Europe to reciprocate in case a conflict erupts in the Asia-Pacific. And finally, the strong international response to the Ukraine war might deter China from changing the status-quo in the Asia-Pacific.

The first few months of the Ukraine war seemed to suggest that Biden's efforts to craft a united front against authoritarian aggressors succeeded. European countries have dramatically overhauled their foreign policies. Germany, for instance, has rapidly increased its defence spending, and is in the midst of developing a new national security strategy spearheaded by its foreign minister Annalena Baerbock to ensure that Germany does not fall victim to Chinese economic blackmail ^(DEUTSCHE WELLE 2022A). Sweden and Finland have begun the process of gaining NATO membership after decades of neutrality ^(LOSS 2022; NATO 2022B), while NATO itself has for the first time recognized China as a "challenge", and decided to "step up cooperation with [its] Asia-Pacific partners", many of which attended the NATO summit for the first time ever in June 2022 ^(NATO 2022A, 2022C).

However, the Biden administration's response to the Ukraine war also bears considerable risks. In particular, there is the sustainability question. Over the long term, a commitment to both theatres is likely to drain American resources and attention, especially if the war were to go into a second year. During the first two months of the war, the United States already provided more than \$53 billion in financial aid to Ukraine ^(GROPPE 2022). Moreover, with presidential elections looming in the background, it

remains to be seen how lasting the current domestic consensus on the Ukraine war and China proves to be (SEE E.G. WATSON 2022). Indeed, even among the Democratic leadership, there is substantial disagreement on how to handle key elements of Washington's China policy. For instance, Speaker Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan in August 2022 attracted substantial criticism from her fellow Democrats, including Biden, who had cautioned against the trip in the weeks before (KINE 2022). Finally, despite the professed initial unity, just how far America's allies and partners would be willing to go to stand with America regarding either Europe or China is unclear. While most of them have supported the condemnation of and sanctions against Russia – e.g., Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand – India has notably not done so. And despite the buzz around the similarities between Ukraine and Taiwan, whether there would be an equally strong and univocal condemnation of China by regional countries if it was to invade Taiwan is by no means clear (MAHBUBANI 2022).

Moreover, although Europe coordinates its activities closely with those of the United States when it comes to Russia, it does not prevent Europe's emergence as a more independent bloc with little interest in joining teams with the United States in the Asia-Pacific (SLAUGHTER 2022). Indeed, in the months following the invasion, European countries had the time to fine-tune their responses to the Ukraine war. By the end of 2022, there were mounting signs that they tried to develop a more autonomous role for themselves as stabilizers and mediators between the United States and China. Germany's chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasized the importance of Europe's independence as a global actor at the same time as he rejected the re-emergence of bloc politics, and, with it, efforts to isolate Beijing or curb cooperation (SCHOLZ 2022). Similarly, France's President Emmanuel Macron urged regional powers in the Asia-Pacific, including France, to play a cooperative role to avert a confrontation between the two great powers (FRANCE 24 2022). That said, there are also considerable domestic divisions on China as, for instance, the disagreement in Germany's three-party government surrounding the acquisition of shares of Hamburg harbor by a Chinese company demonstrates (DEUTSCHE WELLE 2022B).

In sum, despite the multiple reassurances that the United States is able to 'walk and chew gum at the same time' regarding Russia and China, in many ways, committing to both theatres is choosing not to choose, and

hoping that the war comes to a quick resolution. Rather sooner than later, the Biden administration might have to decide between Ukraine and China. However, when this moment comes, America will likely be stretched thin and forced to walk back on some of its commitments, which is likely to cause severe damage to its relations with both Asian-Pacific and European partners. In turn, this would impede the Biden administration's ability to maintain its China policy. Above all, whether it is sustainable or not, as the next section demonstrates, the Biden administration's response to the Ukraine war has major repercussions for China and its security strategy, thereby further driving the downward spiral of security in the Asia-Pacific.

China: 'We don't like what we are seeing'

In contrast to the United States, China initially responded to the Ukraine war by adopting a non-committal and non-offensive position that tried to balance its many conflicting interests. Over time, however, China has begun to refocus on strengthening its security amid a rapidly deteriorating security situation, which has chiefly meant its pushing back against the emergence of an anti-authoritarian coalition. Aside from concentrating its efforts on creating anti-hegemonic partnerships, particularly with countries in the Global South, it has deepened its relations with Russia, flexed its rhetoric and muscle to demonstrate its resolve, and moreover further encouraged Europe's autonomy.

In the first few weeks of the conflict, China was not willing to endorse or condemn Russia's aggression. On the day of the invasion, China instead remarked that it was "*closely monitoring the latest developments*", and called on all sides "*to exercise restraint and prevent the situation from getting out of control*" (MOFA 2022A). Despite the publication of a joint statement by Russia and China on their "*friendship with no limits*" right before the war (RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL EXECUTIVE OFFICE 2022), China officially maintains a position of neutrality (MOFA 2022D; SHENG – YELU 2022). To end the war, it has offered itself as a mediator, emphasized its great concerns about the humanitarian toll of the war, and provided (arguably modest) humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Chinese officials have stated that only diplomacy can lead to the resolution of the war and repeatedly called on everyone to "*respect and protect the sovereignty of all countries*" (MOFA 2022F).

In practice, however, there are several indications that China has from the beginning followed a more ambivalent position which some have referred to as “*pro-Russian neutrality*” (HILLE – YU 2022; SUN 2022). For instance, Chinese officials typically mirror Russia’s language about, justifications of and position on the war and call it a “*crisis*” and “*special military operations*” (MOFA 2022B) or point to NATO’s expansion as a major cause of the conflict since it has insulted Russia’s “*legitimate security concerns*” (MOFA 2022D). In China and internationally, America was regularly portrayed as the culprit who has “*started the fire and fanned [the] flames*” (MOFA 2022A), and who benefitted from the war (CHINESE EMBASSY IN GERMANY 2022; DENG – HUO 2022). While many countries have placed sanctions on China, its officials have emphasized that the country opposes “*all illegal unilateral sanctions*”, and that “*China and Russia will continue to carry out [a] normal trade cooperation following the spirit of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit*” (MOFA 2022E). Similarly to Russia, China was also concerned about the alleged U.S. military biological laboratories in Ukraine (MOFA 2022G).

At the same time, from the beginning of the war onwards, China’s actions did not mirror its rhetoric. For instance, both state-owned and private companies have quietly complied with the sanctions, and China has thus far not supported Russia directly with military or economic aid despite some reports that Russia had requested such support (REUTERS MEDIA 2022; WONG – BARNES 2022). China moreover continues to recognize Ukraine as a sovereign state, and has met with Ukrainian diplomats (SULIMAN – FERNÁNDEZ SIMON 2022). The first element in China’s position on Ukraine emphasized that “*China maintains that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries should be respected and protected*”, which “*applies equally to the Ukraine issue*” (MOFA 2022C). Placing this before the call to take everyone’s legitimate security concerns seriously – a reference to Russia – can be read as support for Ukraine’s position and implicit criticism of Russia’s aggression (SUN 2022; YANG 2022).

In short, China’s initial position has emerged as a complex mixture of words and deeds that oscillate between support for Russia, Ukraine, Europe, and the United States, depending in large part on the audience and issue at hand (SUN 2022; HAENLE – BRESNICK 2022; YAN 2022). Rather than seeking to maximize potential gains, as some observers have expected (CORBETT ET AL. 2022; IVANOV 2022; LIN 2022; MASTRO – SCISSORS 2022; ROGERS 2022), China’s initial strategy

thus chiefly revolved around maintaining as non-offensive and non-committal a profile as possible. Yet, the Ukraine war has made the simultaneous pursuit of these objectives nearly impossible (SEE ALSO MEDEIROS 2022). For instance, as seen in the previous section, avoiding international isolation had been a key reason for China seeking a greater partnership with Russia in recent years; hence, abandoning Russia would discredit years of Chinese foreign policy. Yet, too much support for Russia in the aftermath of the invasion might bring about China's international isolation. China's long-standing support for non-interference in the domestic affairs of another country (concerning especially Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan) moreover sits at odds with China's acquiescence to Russia's "security claims" in Ukraine. Against this background, China's insistence that the "current situation is not what we want to see" (LIU 2022; MOFA 2022C) seems genuine.

While one could make the argument that China's initial response has allowed it a large degree of flexibility to cater to the respective demands of its various audiences without having to firmly commit to any of them, the lukewarm mediation efforts have greatly frustrated all the parties involved. Here, China has missed a chance to present itself as a reliable partner and a responsible great power invested in international law and order, which would have done much to discredit the characterization of it as an authoritarian state bent on changing the international order to its liking. On the contrary, China's guarded response to the war has strengthened U.S. efforts to craft an anti-authoritarian coalition, as seen earlier. Furthermore, the sustainability of China's non-committal stance is also doubtful. Contrary to the expectation of a quick victory, the war is ongoing and continues to drain Russia's resources. Once Russia requires China's help to avoid collapse, China will be in a position where it can no longer avoid choosing between Russia and the West. Not only would this mean abandoning its foreign policy goal of diversifying its friendly relationships, especially in Europe, but it is also likely to deteriorate China's security: Either China will lose Russia, its most important partner in its anti-hegemonic struggle with the United States, or that very struggle will be intensified once China is to enter into a quasi-alliance with Russia.

Over time, as the Biden administration seemingly succeeded in crafting an anti-authoritarian alliance, China has realized that its security environment has deteriorated much faster than it had originally anticipated.

Consequently, China has begun to alter its assessment of and response to the Ukraine war, and is likely going to embark on a broader reassessment of its foreign and defense principles. Most importantly, China has recognized that irrespective of what it says or does, America seems bent on its de-facto containment policy (NI ET AL. 2022; ZHAO ET AL. 2022). Although China has fervently criticized America's "attempt at full-blown containment and suppression of China", the "democracy versus authoritarianism" narrative which drives the conflation of Russia with China, as well as efforts to link Taiwan and Ukraine (CHINESE EMBASSY IN THE UNITED STATES 2022A, 2022B), China's officials have also recognized how little they can do about these things. Indeed, what America's response to the Ukraine war logically clarifies to China is that any meaningful cooperation with the United States or its partners on Ukraine or other issue areas is unlikely to change America's determination to contain China. Hence, any cooperation with the United States becomes a liability in the strategic competition with the United States. While China's desire for some level of stability in the U.S.-China relations had checked China's ambition in the past, following the Ukraine war, chances are that China will emerge as an increasingly uninhibited great power in search of security.

In this context, while Taiwan had been a hotspot in the U.S.-China relations for a long time, the Ukraine war has further increased the related tensions. Aside from the strategy to interweave Europe and the Asia-Pacific and present Taiwan as a (potential) future victim, in the midst of the Ukraine war, Biden has suggested that America is willing to intervene militarily in case of a Chinese attack on Taiwan only for the White House to reaffirm its adherence to the 'One-China Principle' shortly thereafter (LIPTAK ET AL. 2022). This mixed signaling is likely supposed to deter China from moving on Taiwan without having to explicitly change the status-quo or America's principle of 'strategic ambiguity'. Yet, for China, such remarks suggest with renewed clarity that the United States might support Taiwan's independence in the foreseeable future, which is something which Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 further underscored. Against this background, it is unsurprising that both Taiwan and China study the Ukraine war and in particular Ukraine's successful innovations in great detail to assess if and how they might be deployable also in a possible military conflict over Taiwan (BLANCHARD 2022). Finally, the elections in the United States and Taiwan in 2024 put increasing pressure

on China since US presidential candidates who have already come out in favor of Taiwan's independence – such as Mike Pompeo – might assume office. Some observers have begun to speculate that China was therefore considering a speedy reunification by force (CHEN – WAN 2022; GROSSMAN 2022; SEVASTOPULO – HILLE 2022).

For the time being, as a response to America's choices in the Ukraine war and in particular its seeming success in building an anti-authoritarian coalition, China has taken several measures. For one, it has warned the United States and its partners that they should not underestimate *“the resolve and capabilities of China's armed forces to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity”*, and that it would, for instance, *“fight at all costs”* if *“anyone dares to secede Taiwan from China [sic]”* (XINHUA 2022). Demonstrating its resolve, China has also increased the amount of warplanes sent into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (LONDON – CHANG 2022).

Moreover, China has doubled-down on efforts to craft and lead anti-hegemonic partnerships and institutions. In particular, it has reached out to countries in the Global South to join it in its vision of a multipolar (i.e., non-U.S.-led, hegemonic) world where countries do not have to choose between Ukraine/the United States and Russia or suffer the consequences of the war. Central to such efforts are strategic narratives promoted in global fora by the top leadership that present America and its partners as promoting exclusionary bloc politics which go against the interests of the international community and, in particular, developing countries. For instance, a sharp rebuttal of America's China policy emphasized that the ‘West's’ united response to the war in truth only included a few select countries: *“Among the more than 190 members of the UN, more than 140 countries, including NATO member state Turkey, have refused to impose sanctions on Russia”* (CHINESE EMBASSY IN THE UNITED STATES 2022B). Similarly, at the BRICS Summit in June 2022, Xi Jinping sharply criticized how *“some countries attempt to expand military alliances to seek absolute security”* (MOFA 2022M). Elsewhere, Xi emphasized how *“some countries have politicized and marginalized the development issue”* (MOFA 2022). Moreover, against the background of food shortages and ongoing developmental needs of the Global South, China has also emphasized that the international community should not *“level down support and input to Africa because of the Ukraine issue”* (MOFA 2022N).

In this spirit, China continues to spearhead alternative institutions that it presents as non-exclusionary and non-political. Aside from further emphasizing the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative, China's leaders have begun to promote two novel initiatives that are ostensibly more inclusive and equitable than the U.S.-led international order. As such, both the 'Global Security Initiative' and the 'Global Development Initiative' are presented on global and regional platforms as necessary supplements to the multilateral UN system (SEE E.G. MOFA 2022J, 2022K, 2022L, 2022M).

To counteract Biden's efforts to craft an anti-authoritarian alliance, China has moreover tried to pull European countries away from coordinating their China policies with that of Washington, and relied on diplomatic overtures, concessions, and the continuing appeal of its market to do so. As such, late in 2022, Xi hosted Olaf Scholz, who was accompanied by a range of German managers, as the first Western leader to visit China since the beginning of the pandemic, and shortly thereafter invited European Council President Charles Michel. In both cases, China catered to European concerns by publicly opposing the usage of nuclear weapons, clarifying that it would not supply Russia with weapons, and pledging to keep the Chinese market open for European business (MOFA 2022O).

Finally, China has also decided to strengthen its ties with Russia as the war dragged on. Several weeks into the war, China declared its dedication to "*promot[ing] China-Russia relations in the new era to higher levels*" (MOFA 2022H), and later also lauded the "*great resilience and internal dynamism of [the] bilateral cooperation*" (MOFA 2022I). Right after Biden's pledge to defend Taiwan, China and Russia conducted their first joint military exercise in East Asia after the outbreak of the Ukraine war (WONG 2022B).

Despite these efforts, whether China's crafting of an anti-hegemonic coalition will be successful remains to be seen. Russia's pariah status in international politics makes the country likely to welcome any support from China, and willing to support China's initiatives. The countries in the Global South might be more hesitant to move closer to China if its 'multilateral' initiatives come across as too explicitly directed against the United States. While several European leaders have recently emphasized the need for an autonomous Europe and their aversion to bloc politics,

whether Europe would assume a neutral role in case conflict broke out in the Asia-Pacific is unclear.

Finally, there is the question of China's relation with Russia, which remains uneasy at best. Although it is difficult to judge the exact nature of the bilateral relations from the outside, it is clear that Russia has not been forthright with China. A spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, for instance, argued early on that Russia would not "*conduct missile, air or artillery strikes on cities*" (MOFA 2022A), but was proven wrong shortly thereafter. After a meeting between Xi and Putin at a summit in Kazakhstan in September 2022, it became abundantly clear that rather than supporting Russia's position, China had important "*questions and concerns*" over Ukraine that Russia needed to account for (THE GUARDIAN 2022G). Despite such grievances, Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine and its pariah status have allowed China to strengthen its influence in Central Asia (SHI 2022). In so far as the region was traditionally Russia's backyard, frictions between China and Russia might be on the horizon, even if China tries to strengthen the bilateral ties for now.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ASIA-PACIFIC

This article has discussed the impact of the Ukraine war on the strategic competition between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific. After examining how the United States and China have adjusted their foreign and defence policies to the realities of the strategic competition, the article has delved into the response of the United States and China to the Ukraine war during its first year. Based on this examination, it can be argued that although the war could have provided some reprieve for the increasingly tense security situation in the Asia-Pacific, the way both the United States and China have responded to the war has further worsened the security landscape in the Asia-Pacific.

In terms of the United States' response to the war, the Biden administration has opted to make use of the shockwave of the war to advance its China policy. In so far as most of the U.S.'s European and Asia-Pacific partners had in the past been hesitant to embrace the Biden administration's representation of China, the war has played into the administration's hands as it provided ample evidence that interstate warfare

and authoritarian aggression were no relics from the past. By choosing to present an authoritarian alliance between China and Russia as a *fait accompli*, and Russia's unjust war against Ukraine as a preview of things to follow in the Asia-Pacific and Taiwan, the Biden administration made much progress in terms of implementing its China policy, and crafting an anti-authoritarian alliance of democratic nations that is poised to respond to authoritarian aggression anywhere, including in the Asia-Pacific. Yet, as the article has also argued, the sustainability of Biden's approach is by no means guaranteed. While Biden's response to the Ukraine war undoubtedly worsens the U.S. relations with China, by the time the United States might have to make difficult choices between Europe and the Asia-Pacific, it is likely to be stretched thin and facing an increasingly uninhibited China.

China's initial choice to keep a non-committal, non-confrontational position on Ukraine, on the other hand, has also further worsened the security situation in the Asia-Pacific. Rather than presenting itself as a supporter of the international order, China maintained a non-committal stance toward and deepened its relationship with Russia, which have become key arguments for why an anti-authoritarian coalition was direly needed, and had to be directed against China, too. Instead of being able to wait until after the war settles, China's security environment deteriorated quickly. As China realized that the United States was bent on its de-facto containment policy irrespective of China's behaviour, most incentives for China's cooperation with it have disappeared, and China has become increasingly uninhibited in the pursuit of its interests. China has thus opted to double-down on efforts to create anti-hegemonic partnerships, including deepening its ties with Russia. By now, China is likely in the middle of a profound reassessment of its security and defence principles, and only time will tell whether, for instance, China will prioritize the reunification with Taiwan over a *modus vivendi* in the U.S.-China relations. Either way, China's response to the Ukraine war has undoubtedly raised concerns in Washington and elsewhere, and only further drives down the spiral of security competition in the Asia-Pacific.

While the security situation in the Asia-Pacific thus looks increasingly dire, there are many moving parts that might come together to stabilize the relations. At the end of the day, the Ukraine war and the rapid escalation of the conflict in the U.S.-China relations have demonstrated

with renewed clarity how quickly a conflict might break out. Perhaps this might persuade policymakers in the United States and China of the merits of stability in the U.S.-China relations. In so far as Biden's position after the midterm elections has slightly strengthened, it could allow him to emphasize the cooperative dimension of his China policy again; moreover, he might be able to exert greater control over his party's position on issues such as Taiwan. For China, the successful passing of the 20th Party Congress and the consolidation of Xi's power without disruption might also open up space for a more conciliatory tone towards the United States. In this light, the first in-person meeting between Xi and Biden in November 2022 has been called a "baby-step" towards improved relations (NPR 2022). Europe, on the other and, might indeed successfully emerge as a mediator, as countries such as Germany pledge to take a more active role in security politics.

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