

CHINA'S APPROACH TO THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

Ukraine is the terrain for a new geopolitical game and China's position is ambiguous. The article aims to analyse how Beijing places itself in the Ukrainian crisis, considering the BRI, the relations with the European Union and the new Global Security Initiative announced in April. The analysis is based on scientific literature, recent articles and publication, and official documents, both in English and Chinese. The main findings show that China is engaged in a balancing act between Russia and the West, in an apparent neutral stance, that seeks to maximise Chinese gains on the long run.

Keywords: Ukrainian crisis, Global Security Initiative, China's foreign policy, new world order, GSI

Introduction

The ongoing violent conflict in Ukraine has put new strains on the already tense international geopolitical realities and interactions. It affected not only the economic recovery plans of states and their defence spendings, but it also changed the European regional security landscape and the international balance of power. It brought to light once more the discrepancies between East and West, in a new struggle of narratives, of conflicting perspectives, of unfulfilled responsibilities and tough decisions. It rippled across continents, creating instability and illustrated how states are even more interconnected in their search for geopolitical advantages and pursuit of economic interests. Ukraine became thus the terrain for a new geopolitical game that involved the ambitions of several regional and international actors, including – in a direct or indirect manner – those of China.

Provided that things are constantly changing, the article aims to analyse how China positions itself in the violent dispute between Russia and Ukraine, considering its viewpoint on foreign intervention, its foreign policy options and the “no limit” partnership with Russia, announced at the beginning of February 2022. An important element to mention is the fact that all events discussed are still in progress. The pandemic has accelerated international trends and the level of actors' interactions

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unfold at a faster rate than before. For example, the Global Security Initiative (GSI) causes new reactions from day to day, mainly because more information becomes available and is released to the public. Thus, the constant unfolding of events becomes both a limitation and a subject of constant research.

The main research question is *how China acts and reacts (or better said adapts and plans) to the new stimulus triggered by the conflict in Ukraine?*.

Violence between Russia and Ukraine broke out a few months ago and China, up until April 2022, didn't manifest an engaged rhetoric. The month of May saw a response from Beijing, leaning not exactly towards the West, but not towards the Russian-like narrative either. This stance was more set towards the middle ground, based on a cost-benefit approach (Beijing has more to gain, from an economic point of view, from the West, than from Russia). China is thus engaged in a balancing act, focused on promoting its own interest, especially since the international sanctions imposed by the West to Russia made Beijing pay attention and follow the situation as a "study case" scenario.

One of the research goals is to analyse how the conflict in Ukraine affected the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the relation between China and the EU. The BRI is more than a global development strategy, as it has an important foreign policy undertone. By pinpointing Ukraine's place in the general BRI framework, we can deduce if there might be any direct interest that could motivate any future sustained reaction from China. The EU-China relations points to the evolution of relation at the international level, and China's perceived role in the general dynamic. In addition, this research goal gives us an indication of whether there is any geoeconomic incentive that would motivate China to make a direct contribution to the conflict and see the leverage the EU could have to determine China to act.

Another goal is orientated towards presenting the new Global Security Initiative (GSI) proposed by the Chinese president Xi Jinping at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2022 (April). The initiative is shaped after the violent conflict broke out in Ukraine, and it represents the Chinese alternative to the western approach. The ongoing developments of geopolitical processes show China's involvement in global politics, an element of novelty for the "empire under the sun", to which the barbarians usually come. However, even if the GSI seems to be the response given by China, that contains a roadmap of action, at this stage it is only a theoretical proposal, put forward in an unclear manner, that only gives us clues regarding Chinese intentions. By examining the GSI we can figure out if China has just dodged a direct response, through an elusive initiative, or if it reacted to the stimulus of Ukraine.

The BRI is a well-established Chinese initiative with an ample mechanism behind it, a sustained implementation effort and a complex vision. The GSI, on the other hand, is the freshest product in the Chinese repertoire. By addressing both initiatives in the Ukraine context, we can assess if China has serious intentions (in short if its interests are affected enough to get involved) or if it will just navigate in

an apparent neutral stance long enough to keep itself away from the conflict, the dissatisfaction of the West and unwanted Russian requests. Furthermore, the interaction between China and the EU reveals a part of the calculations made by Beijing, while the BRI and the GSI, as means for direct action, could reveal if China decided to adapt/react or if it is just waiting for the waters to settle as it follows its own course.

The methodology used to conduct this research is qualitative, with an analysis of the scientific literature appropriate to the topic and based on the study of some key author's books (for example it will draw on several elements from "Destined for War" Graham Allison), of recent articles and relevant scientific publications. Moreover, information found in Chinese publications is used. Official documents, reports and state initiatives are the reference point in terms on information provided. Articles from independent research institutions dealing with this subject are employed since in some cases the materials in English, German or French offer other information compared to those in Chinese. Research papers and researchers educated opinions from Chinese institutions are studied, such as China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Centre for China and Globalization, just to name a few. This approach has the purpose of establishing a wide understanding of the situation, by investigating recent Chinese declarations and statements, that describe the context and the interactions of specific variables.

However, literature on the GSI or the implications of the conflict of Ukraine for BRI is limited. Some treat the subject marginally, while others focus on the period between 2013-2021. The same is the case for journal articles (the GSI came out nearly two months ago, and the UE-China Summit was roughly a month ago). However, online analysis, publications and reports could be found in abundance. Western social media (Twitter, Facebook) did not postpone to show their positions regarding the most recent developments. The same can be said about the Chinese counterparts (WeChat media and Weibo). In addition, the present paper uses information presented at conferences and online events such as MERICS China's Return of Uncertainty – A Perfect Storm? and the debate on the security situation in Eastern Europe (with special speaker mister Vladimir Socor).

The methods used in the elaboration of the paper are documentation and context analysis. Classical research techniques will be used - induction and deduction, but also the interdisciplinary method. Moreover, research techniques belonging to the field of communication are used, namely content analysis of some documents, as well as the analysis of speeches, to determine displayed positions of China or the EU.

The first part of the article will investigate China – Ukraine interactions. It will briefly present the recent evolution of bilateral relations, correlated to Ukraine's degree of involvement in the BRI. In doing so, it will be possible to ascertain if China has any major interest in the country, or if its interactions can be postponed and

resumed in a more convenient environment. The second part will follow the China – EU dynamic, since perspective of the EU provided China with an insight of possible politic and economic consequences (hints that transpired during the EU-China 23rd Summit). These two parts relate to the first research goal as we try to pinpoint the motives that might determine Beijing to act in the current dynamic, as well as possible outside stimuli that may call for a specific reaction.

The third part will focus on the GSI and aims to present recent information on the topic as it transpires from the Chinese documents and public statements. It represents an early analysis, as we aim to identify key concepts of the Chinese approach to the Ukrainian issue. To complete the image, we will draw on how the initiative was perceived in recent articles of some popular publication that tackle Chinese affairs on the international scene. The objective is to explore how the GSI can be the Chinese response to the situation, and what it conveys about its position. The conclusion section will make an x-ray of the geopolitical situation for China, underlines the main findings of the three parts and offer an answer to the research question based on the provided information.

1. Just a small delay in China’s economic outlook

The economic strategy that Beijing had in mind for Eastern and Central Europe, is, to a certain degree, affected by recent events in Ukraine. Plans envisioned in Ukraine, through the BRI, suffered a setback but are likely to be resumed once the conflict ends.

Ukraine joined the BRI in 2017 and aspired to play a key role in the Eastern European part of the Initiative (maybe even become an alternative to the Russia-Belarus corridor). Since then (and even before, starting with 2013 at least) the two actors signed several agreements on agriculture, culture, energy, education, healthcare, etc. The phone call Volodymyr Zelensky had with Xi Jinping on 13 July 2021 summarizes the state of affairs at the middle of last year¹. This conversation, being the first between the representatives, happened after the signing of “an intergovernmental agreement (on June 30, 2021), on strengthening cooperation in the construction of infrastructure, including railways, airports, ports and other facilities”². According to the read outs, the leaders focused on future infrastructure projects and connectivity plans, and from the transcript provided by the Ukrainian president this was just a part of the “Big Construction plan”: “the participation of

¹ President of Ukraine Official Website, *Current events (2021), Volodymyr Zelenskyy's first phone conversation with President of China Xi Jinping took place*, 13 July, retrieved from [https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vidbulasya-persha-telefonna-rozmovova-volodimira-zelenskogo-z-69509](https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vidbulasya-persha-telefonna-rozмова-volodimira-zelenskogo-z-69509)).

² Xinhua (2022), *Interview: China, Ukraine have broad prospects for BRI cooperation, says Ukrainian economist*, 07 January (retrieved from <https://english.news.cn/europe/20220107/199a78fc8f414760b22610a597c80762/c.html>).

Chinese investors in the implementation of several projects on the development of seaport infrastructure, construction and modernization of roads, development of railways, urban infrastructure, and municipal services” (Zelensky). However, as usual, China’s tone was more reserved and calculated. Like in many cases, its approach was apolitical (Goulard, 2021), based on trade, economic cooperation and (of course) infrastructure – tactic that didn’t alert Russia (even if China came to be the largest trading partner of Ukraine), and presented a model of international interaction that the international community (and European community) was already accustomed to.

In 2019 China was Ukraine’s “biggest single trading partner” (Reuters, 2022) and in 2020-2021 it became the largest importer of consumer goods (Reuters, 2022), representing 10.9% of GDP (in 2020) and 15.1% of the total foreign trade turnover of Ukraine³.

Important companies that operate are COFCO Corp (CNCOF.UL), China Pacific Construction Group, China Harbor Engineering Co (CHEC) and Huawei Technologies (HWT.UL), with a total of \$150 million in direct investment by the end of 2019 (Reuters, 2022).

Reasons why Ukraine is of interest from a geoeconomics point of view to China are drawn also in an article published by the Diplomat in 2016. In the aforementioned contribution, the author argues that Ukraine is strategically located along the route to Europe and could become a transit hub. The article pointed out that Ukraine had the advantage to be in the geographic proximity of Europe with potential for investment considering the trade agreements it has with the EU (the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement between the EU and Ukraine) and a relative gain in the geoeconomics architecture of Eastern European states (Mykal, 2016).

In the technology sector, Ukraine approached China the same way European states have – it set specific boundaries and not allowed Beijing to access specific parts of its critical infrastructure, including implementation of 5G networks by Chinese companies.

There are success projects developed in partnership with China, such as COFCO grain terminal, China Pacific Construction Group metro line, the China Longyuan Power Group Corporation large wind farm in Yuzhne, and projects that failed to deliver like the takeover of a local producer by an aerospace company Skyrizon and Power Construction Corp’s powerplant in Donetsk. Furthermore, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict made it challenging for the Chinese government to draw on previous trade and infrastructure exchanges (Hutson, 2022).

³ Three questions to Yurii Poita, The China-Ukraine Partnership: Surviving a Deteriorating Strategic Environment, February 2022 (retrieved from www.institutmontaigne.org/en/analysis/china-ukraine-partnership-surviving-deteriorating-strategic-environment).

From the above summary, we can estimate that relations between China and Ukraine followed a specific Chinese recipe, usually applied to European states. The distinctions that can be made are that China had to keep an eye on Russian sensibilities and not appear to establish a specific influence zone. Moreover, the projects under BRI (or bilateral to the same extent) do not have an element of novelty and are not of a significant scale (such as the infrastructure and digital projects in Africa). In addition, the absence of immediate geographical proximity of the region, and the relative level of economic interest make China unwilling to compete or have a direct involvement. The calculation appears quite simple: there is no high enough stake.

2. The outcome of the EU-China Summit

The EU-China Summit, held on the 1st of April 2022, tackled the Ukrainian issue as one of its topics. Depending on the source read, the event is presented in different way. The European Union official reports emphasize China's attitude towards the crisis and how Beijing did not live up to European expectations (European Council, 2022), while the Chinese state outlets stress on the other aspects discussed, such as COVID response, trade, climate change and digital economy (MFA China, 2022). The 23rd Summit was a diplomatic game with back-and-forth messages. Brussel didn't manage to lure in Beijing (so far) or appease the anti-NATO narrative (Zhu, 2022). The Communist Party journal Qiushi mentions – short and dry – that the European Officials “shared their views and propositions on the Ukraine crisis” (Qiushi, 2022). President Xi's intentions are present in the article. China “supports the EU's efforts toward a political settlement of the Ukraine issue” and is taking action for peace talks and encourages negotiations between Russia and Ukraine (as the best way to achieve a viable solution).

As an addition, Foreign Minister Wang Yi's words are reminded to the public in an article on Xinhua: “China does not seek geopolitical interests, nor will it watch the event from a safe distance while sitting idle, or add fuel to the fire”⁴. Most governmental readouts of the Chinese high officials reiterate this aspect, in an attempt to uphold a posture of neutrality. The statement can be interpreted either as a typical Asian construct, intentionally ambiguous, reminding us of Sun Tzu's teachings (Sun, 2010, p.3) or as a statement that covers absolutely all possible possibilities and leaves room for any future line of action, depending on actors' dynamics. It is clear that China will try to maximize the results in its favour and through this type of language will fight accusations regarding the morality of the statements. Especially because in the after math of the conflict the moral aspect of the parties' actions will have an increased value.

⁴ Xinhua (2022), *China sincerely wants peace in Ukraine: FM*, 05 April 2022 (retrieved from <http://english.news.cn/20220405/30d94c6a19c4492f9e202849c0bfff9fd/c.html>).

Disagreements in the EU-China relationship will continue to arise because they identify different root causes of the conflict and discussions focus on them. The Ukrainian issue unveiled an important tension and this affects the cooperation between the two, being more and more complicated to determine which instance to use: partner, competitor or rival. “Business as usual” is difficult to maintain, since China, it is obvious, that will not accept any other manner of action than its own, or that it will not serve its national interest. However, a clear positioning can determine a precise way of action, beyond certain international platitudes. Graham Allison in “Destined for War” made the point that “the more the US government understands China’s aims, the better prepared it will be to resolve differences” (Allison, 2017, p. 265). This can also be successfully applied to the EU’s case. Thus, if concrete action is to be taken, the parties will have to start from the ideas that bring them closer and not from those that separate them. On the long term, pressure and a strategy to engage China in the Ukrainian issue in Western terms could corner Beijing and have the opposite effect. The humanitarian aid effort and the promotion of dialogue (DW, 2022) are issues that China would probably be willing to engage with the EU without “sacrificing” the relationship with Russia (Haenle and Corre, 2022). Any Chinese foreign policy action is made in line with its national security paradigm.

However, the European Union has not received a definitive answer from China on the issue at hand. If the first round ended with a positioning of the actors, the match can evolve in different ways. China can choose to be pro-Ukraine and pro-Russia at the same time, using its own logic. For example, Oleksiy Arestovych (Ukrainian presidential advisor) on 11 May made a point on Twitter that “China has made its choice in favour of Ukraine”. China is going to find a way to back Ukraine if this will turn out beneficial on the long term. We must not overlook the fact that Beijing is in a delicate position both economical and internal (pandemics/COVID need of the US and EU market), and it does not want to add to the equation a new set of complications (sanctions or jeopardizing the economic growth). It is also uncommon for China to intervene and get directly involved. It is more characteristic to the Chinese to act in the rebuilding of Ukraine (labour, materials sold). Export of “foreign aid” as an infrastructure to increase political ties is a much-preferred method.

In an article that was available only for a few hours on China’s Phoenix News, Gao Yusheng (former Chinese ambassador to Ukraine) made points on the effects that the Ukrainian violent conflict might have on the international order and presents possible outcomes, Russia not being one of the winners in any of them. Even if the Chinese media most times uses the Russian narrative and according to analysts it echoes Russian propaganda, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba made an

important contribution in Xinhua News Agency⁵. The coverage on the conflict presented by Xinhua (in Chinese) changed in the last part of April and beginning of May. Even if it was never the case for a “pro-Russian” or “pro-Ukrainian” approach, the narrative is shifting away from Russia considering disadvantages it may bring, towards on reporting on the conflict from a Western-background threat perspective (for example on CGTN).

3. The Global Security Initiative – China’s general roadmap applied in Ukraine?

The Boao Forum (21 April 2022) marked a significant moment: China’s answer to Ukraine – the Global Security Initiative. It is not what the international community wanted or expected. The Boao Forum is modelled after the World Economic Forum, and is organized in line with Chinese expectations (the Secretariat is located in Beijing), with the main purpose of debating the views of significant guests on the most pressing issues of regional dynamics and international issues. The Chinese president Xi Jinping uses this platform to present official messages. From 2013, it is the first time that he delivers a keynote speech in two consecutive years (2021 and 2022).

“Rising to Challenges and Building a Bright Future Through Cooperation” does not include a direct reference to Ukraine (as several international publications pointed out), but the general description and the moment are directly related. By citing a “Chinese philosopher”, president Xi notes that – “stability brings a country prosperity, while instability leads a country to poverty”⁶, a subtle reminder of the Chinese opposition to the unilateral sanctions. The Global Security Initiative (GSI) includes in a broad way Beijing’s stance regarding the violent conflict in Ukrainian (reiterated countless times by Chinese officials and media outlets) - “stay committed to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, uphold non-interference in internal affairs, and respect the independent choices of development paths and social systems made by people in different countries”⁷ and underlines the proposed solution “stay committed to peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation, support all efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of crises”⁸.

⁵ Xinhua (2022), *Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmitry Kuleba gives an exclusive interview to Xinhua News Agency*, 30 April 2022, (retrieved from http://www.news.cn/world/2022-04/30/c_1128610853.htm).

⁶ Xinhua (2022), *Full Text: President Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the opening ceremony of Boao Forum (BFA) annual conference 2022*, 21 April 2022, (retrieved from http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202204/21/content_WS62616c3bc6d02e5335329c22.html).

⁷ *Idem*.

⁸ *Idem*.

The GSI is based on the concept of “indivisible security” and continues the path set out by the Global Development Initiative, promoting an alternative vision to the American liberal international order. The Sino centric proposal follows the course of action from 2014 and is reluctant in explicitly taking the Russian side. One may argue that the friendship with “no limits” concluded between Russia and China on the occasion of the Winter Olympic Games in February this year, could be a definite way to show support. So far, the diplomatic language and the messages available in state-controlled media are not articulated in this direction (even if they use the Russian narrative and not the Western one). At first sight, a neutral, independent position transpires, accentuated by Li Keqiang declaration made during the EU-China Summit that China “opposes division of blocs and taking sides” (DW, 2022). Furthermore, the keynote speech of Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng at “Seeking Peace and Promoting Development: An Online Dialogue of Global Think Tanks of 20 Countries”, from the 6th of May, offers clarifications on the partnership with Russia in regard to Ukraine:

Some people have twisted the words of the recent China-Russia joint statement and misinterpreted “friendship has no limits and cooperation has no forbidden areas” to mean that China had “prior knowledge” of Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine and even “endorsed” it. They have therefore concluded that China must be held accountable for the conflict. This is absurd. (MFA China, 2022)

Yet lessons learned, described in H. Kissinger (2011) “On China” and in G. Allison (2017) “Destined for War”, remind us that China even if it established closer ties with a country, it presented a different image in the public domain.

The GSI is completed by Foreign Minister Wang Yi in his article “Implement global security initiatives to safeguard world peace and tranquillity”. Relevant information is also found in the regular press conference given by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin on the 21st of April 2022.

Wang Yi’s article points out from the beginning that the GSI is a “major initiative” that “clearly answers the era’s issue of what kind of security concept the world needs and how countries can achieve common security”. By the way he structured the argument, the initiative is an ambitious long-term project, that offers “Chinese solutions to international security challenges”. The six principles are described using abstract concepts and key words like “multilateralism”, “win-win”, “the UN Charter”. The “peaceful development” approach of Beijing’s foreign policy and international emergence is reiterated. In this manner the GSI is depicted as a nonthreatening, believable initiative and not as an attempt at gaining advantages (Rajagopalan, 2022). However, he mentions the Ukraine issue twice, but it encompasses the same reformulated idea: “China, based on the right and wrong, abides by objectivity and fairness, actively promotes peace and talks, and has been

highly recognized by the international community, especially the vast number of developing countries” (Wang, 2022).

The Foreign Ministry Spokesperson continues Xi Jinping’s speech idea and adds the following accent: „regional security hotspots keep flaring up and the European security issue receives worldwide attention”. He points out that regional conflicts are the driving forces of the announcement “it is in this context that President Xi Jinping proposed the Global Security Initiative”. The Ukrainian conflict is included automatically as the trigger which materialized the programme (awaited moment, or window of opportunity). Thus, solutions are proposed: a peaceful resolution of the conflict and dialog, through China’s filter. Wang Wenbin reinforces all the issues mentioned by Xi, emphasizing the multilateral nature of the GSI and the fact that any state can join “it is open to the world and welcomes the participation of all countries”. An important point that must not be overlooked is the fact that the Initiative is categorized as a “public good offered by China”.

During the brief the YTN correspondent (Korean news outlet) raised two questions on the Ukraine issue and the answers were evasive (“On your second question, you may refer to the readout that we released earlier”). The opposition to unilateral sanctions was reiterated and China’s position towards the USA was stated in a “wolf warrior” diplomatic style: “we urge the US to avoid undermining China’s legitimate rights and interests in any form when handling the Ukraine issue and relations with Russia”.

In the same note came the reply to the question addressed by Reuters representative (“I was wondering could you be a bit more specific and share some more details about how exactly going forward China will implement this new initiative?”). The spokesperson answer lacked precision, the concrete melting in abstract (Orwell, 1964) “we are ready to have in-depth exchanges with all parties on implementing the Initiative”.

The GSI applied to the Ukraine issue is found in Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng lecture mentioned above. In short, the speech summarizes China as a responsible major player that acts in the spirit of the UN Charter and it is not willing to “follow in others’ footsteps or jump on bandwagons or act on hearsay”. In Ukraine, Beijing stood for “fairness and justice, and made active efforts to encourage peace talks and provide humanitarian aid. China has no axe to grind or any geopolitical agenda on this issue”.

In the context of the GSI, the same narrative is being reproduced as the one displayed in the past months in the case of Ukraine: “stay committed to international law”, “adopt the principle of indivisible security and reject the attempt to pursue one’s own security at the expense of others”, condemn unilateral sanctions and promote dialogue and negotiation. Wang Yi’s press brief “China’s Five-Pronged Perseverance on Ukraine Issue” from the 1st of April was formulated in a similar tone (MFA China, 2022).

On the subject of the GSI an article published in the Economist entitled “China unveils its vision of a global security order” interprets the initiative as an encrypted message, a subtle threat to the Western world order⁹. It argues that the Russia – Ukraine conflict showed that “China and the West have clashing notions of how to preserve world peace”. An analysis published in Nikkei Asia “Xi floats 'global security initiative' with eye on Pacific - With Belt and Road infrastructure plan stalled over Ukraine, president looks east” further suggests that “Xi’s proposal is being closely vetted in Ukraine. Xi’s close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin has not gone down well in Kyiv, but officials there understand Beijing has a certain influence over Russia and thus the outcome of a potential cease-fire” (Nakazawa, 2022). Elaborating on the subject, “China’s Xi Proposes Global Security Initiative” featured in the Diplomat argues that the GSI “will start to play a prominent role in Chinese public diplomacy and foreign policy posture, so it is worth taking seriously” (Rajagopalan, 2022).

Conclusions

The conflict in Ukraine is still ongoing and so are the actions of key states. Thus, it is soon for conclusions, and only assumptions can be made, based on known facts and uncertain developments.

In the current power architecture, the four major actors, China, Russia, the EU, and the United States, are forcibly interconnected by the state of affairs: ongoing violent conflict, humanitarian crisis and controversial post-geopolitical international situation (and not to mention important geopolitical uncertainties). If only one power were capable, and acted only in its favour, there would be a major imbalance in which it is obvious that the three remaining will be left to draw strategies to balance it. China is currently orientated more towards Russia, although it does not agree with this option, because it does not want to sever relations with the other two actors (even if just to avoid the above scenario, in which China would not be the winning force and suffer not only economic losses), especially Europe.

The turbulences of the conflict influence the expansion of the BRI in Ukraine in terms only of a setback. The direct implication of China to safeguard any economic interest is unlikely, seeing that no major projects were developed, and the existing ones will have to be reconsidered depending on the outcome of the conflict. Not only the BRI has other options, but the economic difficulties that might emerge will be mitigated. The involvement in Ukraine (either on the side of Russia or the West), justified through the BRI, cannot be sustained and such and expeditious endeavour is impossible to be presented on the domestic level, since the Party

⁹ The Economist (2022), *China unveils its vision of a global security order*, 05 May 2022 (retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/china/2022/05/05/china-unveils-its-vision-of-a-global-security-order>).

National Congress is set for autumn. Plus, such a decisive action is not a characteristic of the Chinese style.

The EU – China relation draws some red lines and cautions China to be distant since the Chinese realpolitik determines a careful calculation of benefits and places national interest first.

The GSI is still in its infancy, and it is unclear what path it will take and if it becomes another Chinese flagship project, that will aim to restore China's central role at the global level – more specifically a peaceful and nonthreatening power. It could present an opportunity for the enhancement of the Chinese strategic influence in target countries, especially in the case of Ukraine, due to the fact that is formulated in a way that can be adapted to the period of the conflict as well as to the post-conflict phase. Like all Chinese initiatives, they complement each other and are conceived so that the final beneficiary is Beijing.

The Chinese vision is expressed on two levels. On the diplomatic level, through the conjuncture that Ukraine created, Beijing prepared the ground for the launch of the GSI. Ukraine represents a fruitful testing ground to investigate how the GSI can be applied and what feedback it receives. On the geostrategic level, China used the context to adapt and create an opportunity with prospects for the future. Just as the Belt and Road Initiative, the GSI has the chance to grow and create advantages, building on the existing convenient structure of the current world order.

The GSI will continue to come up in the Chinese narrative. The Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, held at the beginning of June, was another opportunity to remind the international community of the values promoted by China and the objectives of the GSI. In the speech delivered by Chinese State Councilor and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe (“China’s vision for regional order”) Chinese vision, as well as Beijing’s priorities and international aspiration, were reminded to the audience¹⁰. However, the message delivered sounded more like “China promotes peace, equity and justice as long as no one pokes or bothers the dragon”.

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¹⁰ Youtube (2022), *IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2022: China’s vision for regional order*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 12 June 2022 (retrieved at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91mfXWBgKL4>).

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