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Author(s): Stanislav But

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CHINA AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR: INTERESTS, POSITION, CONSEQUENCES

But Stanislav¹

Annotation. The article analyzes the peculiarities of Beijing's positioning in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The author examines Beijing's official rhetoric and actions regarding the war in the context of a number of key geopolitical and PRC goals – strengthening global influence by removing the US from leadership positions, taking control of Taiwan, turning Russia into a dependent country. Particular attention is paid to the internal determinants of Beijing's position, such as national-historical sentiments, problems of socio-economic development and the issues of further development of the political system. Currently, China's geostrategy is dominated by the negative consequences of the war, for example, the growth of the unity of the West and the role of the United States, the strengthening of anti-Chinese sentiments in the Asia-Pacific region, the aggravation of the Taiwan issue against the background of PRC's internal troubles.

Key words: China's interests and position, Russian-Ukrainian war, Taiwan problem, China-USA rivalry

Introduction. The international order is increasingly changing and one of the most important factors in its transformation is the strengthening of China's role. The international status of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has significantly increased due the tremendous success in economic and technological development added with a huge amount of population and military reinforcement. In enhancing its geopolitical position, Beijing's key goal is to weaken the position of the collective West and the United States in world politics. Taking control of Taiwan is one of the top priorities in this regard. In the context on this interests, the attempt to realize Russia's geopolitical ambitions towards Ukraine by military means is a kind of laboratory for future similar steps by Beijing concernig the island and at the same time a tool to distract resources of the USA. However, China's official position is indistinct because of the influence of other factors.

Purpose of the article is to analyze the interests, position and consequences for the PRC in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

¹ But Stanislav, Ph.D sn Political Science, Assistant ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6713-5837> email: but_stanislav@ukr.net.

Results and discussion. China, as a “high league country” of global geopolitics, has a wide range of foreign policy interests, in the context of which it should note a number that are closely intertwined with the Russian-Ukrainian war. Global dominance in the system of international relations appears as a key strategic task, where Washington appears as the main obstacle. However, strategic thinking and the peculiarities of the Chinese foreign policy tradition dictate that Beijing seeks to implement this goal strategically, minimizing the power factor and using the tool of economic dependence. This approach is explained by the need to maintain China’s economic progress with its gigantic population, which is accustomed to economic success and improving of living conditions. Therefore, one of the priority implementation tools is the New Silk Road (NSH) or the “One Belt, One Road” project, the sense of which is to form a network of countries economically tied to China through the expansion of geo-economic activity. This in a strategic perspective should flow into political influence and will allow force out geopolitical opponents from Eurasia and Africa. The Chinese authorities are allocating huge resources for the implementation of the project, especially forming a logistics network tied to China. As a result we can underline that Beijing poses an economic superiority as a key instrument for the realizing the aim of the domination.

Meanwhile, the growth of complex power contributes to the increase of ambition and nationalism of the PRC, where the Taiwan question occupies a special place. The importance of establishing control over Taipei is determined by national-historical sentiments caused by the so-called “century of humiliation”, the period of history (mid 19th century – 1949) when China was a semi-colony of Western powers and the Russian Empire. Focusing on this point, the Chinese leader Xi Jinping proclaimed the goal of the development of statehood as the “Chinese dream”, where one of the main roles is played by the strengthening of Beijing’s international status as a sign of inadmissibility of a humiliating position in the future. Within this purpose the regaining control of Taiwan is considered as the final moment. Regarding the ambition of Xi Jinping, especially the desire to become the third most important leader of the PRC after Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, it can be confidently assumed that the incorporation of Taiwan is a determinant of his political career.

In addition to historical and political motives, the island has a number of other points of interest for Beijing. From an economic point of view, Taiwan plays a unique role in a global economy as a country with a share of 90–95% of the world production of semiconductors, which are critically important in high-tech products in various fields. Moreover, Taiwan has an extremely important geostrategic position for Beijing, as it is located closer to the center of the so-called “first island chain”, which stretches from the west coast of the Japanese islands to the Strait of Malacca. The importance of this row is to contain China’s geopolitical ambitions by the USA and its network of allies in the region of East and Southeast Asia. Therefore, control over the island will allow Beijing to strengthen its strategic and military positions, in particular, in matters of protection of the most economically important coastal part of its territory, to

undermine communications between the United States and other regional allies, as well as to enhance the security of its own maritime communications, and its control over the waters of the South-China Sea, through which most of the international trade of the PRC is realized.

Moving on to analysis the position of China towards the Russia-Ukraine war, it should be clearly understood that both in 2014 and in 2022 Moscow used the military force against Ukraine only by agreeing on such steps with Beijing. Notably, since 2014 China has been using an approach that can be described as “neutral, but with a pro-Russian accent” that means the absence of a criticism of an aggression and an increasing multifaceted cooperation with the Kremlin, but at the same time, the absence of an official political support for the annexation of Crimea and the actions of the Russian Federation (RF).

It should be emphasized that such positioning allows China to receive a number of different benefits, because Moscow, as it was typical for Volodymyr-Suzdal principality during the Golden Horde era, generously paid loyalty to the Eastern suzerain in the conditions of confrontation with the West. For example, in order to diversify export flows, the Kremlin built the Power of Siberia gas pipeline at its own expense and has been exporting energy carriers to the PRC for a long time at low prices. Moreover, Chinese companies bought 20% of Yamal LNG 2 and Arctic LNG 2 projects [1]. Thus, the barrier to access to energy projects from the Russian side was removed. In general, the turnover between the parties increased by 50% since 2014 and amounted to \$146.9 billion by 2021 [2]. Meanwhile, the structure of trade turnover largely corresponds to the interests of China, which exports machine-building products, mobile phones, and other consumer goods, and imports raw materials from the RF: oil, gas, and agricultural products. In this way, the role of Russia as a raw material appendage for the PRC has been strengthened. In addition, Moscow has transferred a lot of areas of the Far East and Siberia to Chinese exploitation.

In the military-technical dimension, Beijing was one of the first to get the opportunity to buy the Russian S-400 complex. This moment also serves as an illustration of the fact that the Kremlin, against the background of the confrontation with the West, removed the so-called problem of the “Chinese threat” from bilateral agenda.

As a result, in terms of bilateral relations, Russia’s dependence on China has increased significantly. An interesting moment in this context was the Moscow’s attempt to establish control in Kazakhstan in January 2022, where the leadership of the political elite was changing. However, according to analysts, the contingent quickly left the country at Beijing’s request. This emphasizes that China’s position has grown significantly in the Central Asian region, which the RF also considers as a part of its sphere of influence. Moreover, according to the proposal-order of the Chinese leader Xi Jinping, the Kremlin did not start a full-scale war while the Olympic Games were going on in the PRC [3].

As for the full-scale military invasion of Russia in 2022, Beijing initially chooses the already tested position of the “pro-Russian neutrality” with its characteristic rhetoric of the adherence to the principles of territorial integrity and the solving a problem through diplomatic means [4]. Meanwhile, such comments

clearly fit into China's declared principles of cooperation with the international community, particularly it concerns principles of respect for territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs. This official position of China is due to the desire to avoid growing fears about possible aggression by China against Taiwan or other neighboring countries. In addition, the support of the aggressor country will have a negative impact on the image of China in the eyes of other partner countries in Asia and Africa, which are increasingly dissatisfied with Beijing's policies. Additionally, such declarations were aimed at stay away from the problem and observe the course of the military confrontation. However, at the beginning of the war, Beijing refused to call the Russian invasion a war.

But the course of the military campaign and the negative consequences of has influenced on Beijing's rhetoric. Indeed, China has faced a number of economic problems. In particular, supplies of neon from Ukraine, a metal used in the production of semiconductors, were interrupted. In addition, there are problems in the field of food security, as Ukraine is a significant exporter of agricultural products to China – corn, wheat, sunflower oil, soybeans. There have also been arised problems with the logistics of the “One Belt, One Road” project that forced Beijing to look for alternative routes. For example, in April 2022 the PRC launched a railway route to Germany bypassing the territory of Russia – through the countries of the South Caucasus, the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe [5]. It shoulded be added that this also brought significant losses, which in the conditions of the current financial unprofitability of the project look even more negative. Moreover, the economic problems of the Beijing were compounded by rising prices of raw materials necessary for the Chinese economy and the loss of foreign markets. In general, according to expert calculations, due to the waiver of sanctions against the RF as of the end of May 2022, the economy of the PRC has lost \$9 billion of foreign capital [6].

Obviously, a quick victory of Moscow was in China's interest because it would set a great precedent for a future power option to take control over Taiwan. Another important interest in a full-scale war is the possibility of a careful analysis of the West's behavior in such situation and the development of countermeasures.

Nevertheless the failure of the Kremlin's blitzkrieg has caused considerable discontent because the protracted nature of the war means that any attempt by Beijing to realize its ambitions for Taiwan or other territorial claims will be harshly accepted by the international community.

Moscow's military failures largely affected the Chinese side's perception of the war. In particular, on March 8, 2022, during a video conference with the leaders of France and Germany, Xi Jinping called Russia's military aggression a “war” [4]. Futher on March 15, China's ambassador to the United States published a column calling Ukraine a sovereign state and vehemently denied reports of alleged government support for Russia [7].

In view of the above, is has been appeared a need for China to distance itself from Moscow's actions in order to avoid a negative imprint on its own image. Therefore, despite official criticism of the sanctions, in order to “save face” and unwillingness to fall under secondary sanctions, Chinese energy giant Sinopec

has suspended investment in Russia's gas chemical industry. Besides, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has temporarily frozen some activities in Russia [7]. For the same reasons, the tech giants Lenovo and Xiaomi also refused to sell products to Russia [8]. Moreover, there were statements about the withdrawal of Chinese shareholders from the Arctic LNG 2 project.

Of course, given the weakness of its military-industrial complex, Moscow appealed to Beijing for military-technical support. In order to prevent this, Western actors have repeatedly stressed the inadmissibility of military-technical assistance to the Kremlin in bypassing international sanctions [9, 10]. And such statements had an effect. Thus, according to the American agency Reuters for two months of the war, American officials have not fixed the direct support of military-technical or economic nature from the PRC to the RF [11].

The explanation of China's approach is in economic terms, where the cooperation with the United States and the European Union is crucial to Beijing. For example, trade turnover with the EU is \$828 billion, and with the USA – \$755.6 billion [12]. Therefore, these figures demonstrate how important the US and the EU are for Beijing from an economic point of view compared to Russia. Thus, the emergence of crisis moments with major economic partners is an issue of higher priority than supporting the Kremlin's criminal war, especially considering that trade wars with the US have already brought losses of \$550 billion [12]. This becomes clear if we recall that ensuring economic development is a key factor both in strengthening China's international position and at the same time fundamental as an element of the informal "social contract" according to which the Communist Party of China (CPC) maintains a monopoly on power but provides a gigantic population with decent socio-economic conditions. Moreover, given China's economic progress, which is facing challenges due to the crisis in a sphere of construction, the importance of economic contacts with the West has increased significantly. To this list, it is also important to add that inflation and unemployment have increased (to the level of 2020, exceeding 6%), which has been reinforced by the introduction of anti-covid quarantines by the authorities throughout China [12].

In addition, such economic difficulties have already begun to cause a social servitude, which is demonstrated by the tendency in the form of clashes between police officers and citizens. Also calls began to be made that the Russian-Ukrainian war was too expensive for the PRC.

Nevertheless, the factor that completes the motivation of China's behavior regarding sanctions appears to be the domestic political situation, where Chinese leader Xi Jinping seeks to hold office for the third time in November 2022. It should be taken into account that the Chinese political system has a rule that one person cannot hold the office of The President of the PRC more than two terms. However, Xi amended the Constitution in 2018 and is legally able to remain in office for an unlimited term. Under such circumstances, the economic crisis has a negative impact on the "social contract" and makes it difficult for Xi to realize his political ambitions. It should also be added that the Chinese leadership can use the attack on Taiwan as a factor to maintain positions of power.

It should be added to the economic dimension that it has been made a report to the Chinese leadership with noting the failure of Russia's adventure in the form of a large-scale war against Ukraine [13]. According to experts, such a report significantly influenced the vision of the Chinese leadership's position on the Russian-Ukrainian war. It is interesting that against this background, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine was invited to give an interview to one of the leading Chinese mass media – the Xinhua agency. Such a step, with the coverage of Ukraine's official position, became an illustration of the Chinese elite's vision of war prospects.

Nevertheless, later Beijing's official rhetoric again took the Russian course, where the thesis that the culprit of the war is the USA [14]. This, in turn, emphasizes that, on the one hand, in the context of the war, relations with the USA play a key role for China, and on the other hand, it allows us to adhere to the already defined position of pro-Russian neutrality, which is characterized by the systematic rhetoric from Xi Jinping in defining the Russian invasion the term of "crisis", not war [15]. Moreover, in the Chinese mass media (it should be taken into account that they are under the control of the authorities) Russian narratives about the war clearly dominate, which accordingly forms a negative attitude towards Ukraine among the citizens of the PRC [16].

Notably, that this kind of official rhetoric, especially points of criticism of sanctions and accusations the USA's role in the war, fits into the peculiarities of Beijing's international positioning and domestic agenda. In this context, it should be underlined that PRC, like a number of other Asian countries, views Russia's war against Ukraine as Russia's war against the West. Accordingly, support for Western sanctions will be seen as support for "former exploiters", which is unacceptable both in terms of domestic aspirations (Chinese authorities systematically use the concept of "century of humiliation") and the international image, where Beijing seeks to position itself as a leader and defender of the interests of Third World countries.

It can be added that the large adherence to sanctions looks unacceptable, even in view of the global ambitions of a country that promotes itself as at least the second power in the world politics, which, together with the United States, manages global international processes.

Generally, the Chinese leadership does not stop trying to economically support Russia in the war against Ukraine. According to the American edition of The Washington Post, Xi Jinping instructed his closest advisers to find ways to provide financial assistance to Russia, but without violating sanctions [17]. One of the options is limited support, so as not to be compromised financially and to show the continuation of the line of neutrality. It follows from this that taking anti-American steps is one of the key principles of Beijing's international behavior, and the Russian-Ukrainian war is an opportunity for its implementation. In this regard, it should be noted that Beijing, despite official statements about not providing financial and military-technical support to the RF, has significantly increased the supply of microchips and other electronic components and raw materials, for example, aluminum oxide, which is used to manufacture metallic aluminum, an important material in arms production and aerospace industry [18].

This approach demonstrates that China is not currently interested in the complete defeat of Russia because Moscow can be used as an additional tool in the global confrontation with the West. For example, during J. Biden's visit to the Quad Leaders' Summit in late May 2022 and the proclamation of a new initiative, the the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), PRC and RF conducted the first joint naval exercises since the start of the war in Ukraine. The purpose was the demonstration of the strength and common position of the sides [19]. Moreover, China and Russia once again demonstrated an anti-Western coordination by a blocking at the end of May 2022 the UN resolution on North Korea due to the launch of ballistic missiles against the background of the already mentioned visit of the American president [20].

Meanwhile, the above-mentioned US initiative, which seeks to limit China's influence in Asia, has become one of the episodes of new challenges for China as a result of the Kremlin's military adventure. This initiative is a part of the chain of events that contributes to the consolidation of Western countries and the strengthening of US positions. To this can be added the consolidation of NATO, the continued strengthening of the AUKUS format, and the intensification of pro-American political circles in many countries. For example, the proChinese Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan, who was in Moscow on a visit at the beginning of the attack on Ukraine, was removed from power [21]. It can also be added that during the mentioned visit of J. Biden to East Asia, the American president said that in the event of an attack by the PRC on Taiwan, the United States will help the island with military means [22].

In general, the actualization of the Taiwan issue became one of the defining consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war for the PKC. For example, Washington showed support for Taipei in July 2022 by approving possible sale of military assistance estimated \$108 million [23]. However, the situation was most aggravated in connection with the program of visits of the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, to Asian countries, including Taiwan, at the end of July and the beginning of August 2022. This provoked an extremely harsh response from Beijing, even with hints of the possible physical elimination of a top American official and the start of war. This situation is due to the high status of N. Pelosi in the American state machine, her anti-Chinese position, but at the same time it overlapped with the already noted factor of Xi Jinping's desire to stay in power for a third term, in the face of growing socio-economic problems. As history shows, as well as the survival practice of V. Putin's regime, the external enemy and war are one of the options for diverting attention from internal problems of society and strengthening one's own positions of power. Nevertheless, the role of the Taiwan issue has significantly increased as an indicator of the dynamics of the geopolitical balance between the PRC and the USA and an international problem that, along with the Russian-Ukraine war, may become one of the triggers of the Third World War as many experts suppose.

Moreover, besides Taiwan, other countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia will increase military spending, which, in turn, will require Beijing to spend more on defense.

Obviously, the Chinese leadership understands that such changes require steps in response. Therefore, Chinese officials have launched campaigns to intensify anti-Western forces, in particular, the initiative to expand the BRICS format was announced by China, the international platform created to demonstrate the alternative to the Western economic organizations [24]. Besides, China has announced a “Global Security Initiative” [25] to stay on track of the international agenda. Also the strengthening of anti-Chinese coalitions amid the background of the Russian invasion of Ukraine requires Beijing to invest additional resources to maintain friendly relations with loyal countries of the Indo-Pacific region.

It would also be logical to note some positive effects of the war for the PRC. In particular, it is obvious that Moscow’s dependence on Beijing will continue to grow and RF will strengthen in the role a source of raw materials for Chinese plants selling oil and gas at low prices taking into account the prospect of an oil embargo from the EU [2]. Interestingly, the PRC even offered to buy the shares of the Russian giant Gazprom, however, Beijing decided not to expose itself to sanctions [1]. Also there have been arisen new opportunities for further displacement of Russian weapons from world markets in favor of Chinese counterparts.

The application of sanctions against the RF forced the Chinese leadership to carry out a “stress test” of its own financial system in case of the introduction of a rehabilitation package against it and the possibility of protecting assets abroad [12]. The tendency towards self-sufficiency, in particular, in the field of chip production, was also strengthened.

Generally, Russia’s defeat could lead to its transformation into a zone of Chinese influence. However, it should be emphasized that in the case of Ukraine’s defeat, China would also benefit from demonstrating the West’s defeat and a favorable basis for invading Taiwan. As a result, it can be stated that in the strategic calculation, Beijing benefits from the implementation of any of the options. This, in turn, explains PRC’s interest in launching a full-scale Russian war against Ukraine.

Conclusions. China’s position on the Russian-Ukrainian war can be defined as “pro-Russian neutrality”, which consists in the absence of an official support for the military aggression with an emphasis on a diplomatic solution, but there is criticism of anti-Russian sanctions, accusations of the US, and the use of the term “crisis” rather than the “war”. In practice, Beijing are realizing some steps to join the sanctions because of the dependence on economic contacts with the West. Meanwhile, there are an active purchase of Russian energy carriers and the supply of semiconductors to the Kremlin. Interestingly, “pro-Russian neutrality” is a modification of the use of the “monkey watching the battle of two tigers” strategy that was tested during the years of the bipolar confrontation between the USA and the USSR. Such geopolitical cunning allows Beijing to use the Russian-Ukrainian war to achieve geopolitical goals of strengthening its position in the rivalry with the United States and creating the favorable conditions for taking control of Taiwan by force, as well as turning Moscow into a dependent country. It should be added that in this way Beijing does not endanger its international image. Notably, that this approach has been successfully used by Beijing since

2014. Generally, the Chinese leadership understands that a full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war will in any case bring a strategic gain: if Ukraine wins, then the RF will become even more dependent on the PRC, and if the Kremlin does, it will become a powerful precedent for a military option to resolve the Taiwan issue. However, in practice, there was a rapid aggravation of the Taiwan issue, that turned into an indicator of the geopolitical rivalry between the PRC and the USA. Among other negative consequences of the war for Beijing – the strengthening of the unity of the West, the growth of the authority of the USA and the anti-Chinese coalition in the Asia-Pacific region, the increase in the prices of raw materials, problems with the supply of food and logistics of the NSS, preparing the steps taken by the West to deter aggression, demonstrating a certain level of weakness at the military and technical level of the Chinese army that is based on Russian equipment. Among the positive consequences are the growing dependence of the Kremlin, gaining access to the resources of Siberia and low prices for Russian energy carriers, the opportunity to analyze and develop steps forward in the case of the seizure of Taiwan by force.

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