



## Chinese Intellectuals' Perspectives on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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### ABSTRACT

The Russia-Ukraine war's causes and consequences have been discussed by diplomats, politicians and intellectuals worldwide. While many accuse the Russian leadership and particularly Russian President Vladimir Putin for the war, others criticize Western countries and especially the US for NATO's eastward expansion and for disregarding Russia's security concerns. Chinese intellectuals with diverse academic and political backgrounds have also contributed to these discussions and offered their assessments about the war in Ukraine as well as what kind of policy China should follow. Because of China's increasing presence in world politics, the position it has taken against as well as the discussions between Chinese intellectuals about the war need to be followed and analysed. In line with this necessity, this study surveys the debates among Chinese intellectuals about the war in Ukraine as well as the policies the Chinese leadership should follow. As a result, this paper claims that because of the sensitive relationship between the authoritarian party-state and Chinese intellectuals, Chinese intellectuals are in a delicate situation compared to intellectuals in the West. Despite this, the Chinese state's relatively balanced and neutral stance and decision of not openly taking sides in the war provided a ground for Chinese intellectuals to publicly share their thoughts about both the war itself and China's position towards Russia's aggression. Nevertheless, due to its close relationship with Moscow, the Chinese state allows only a restricted space for intellectuals to share their views about the war, especially to anti-Russia voices.

**Keywords:** China, Russia, Ukraine, War, Chinese intellectuals

**Jel Codes:** F50, O38

## Çinli Aydınların Rusya'nın Ukrayna İşgali Üzerine Görüşleri

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### Öz

Rusya-Ukrayna savaşı, savaşın nedenleri ve etkileri dünyanın dört bir yanındaki diplomatlar, politikacılar ve aydınlar tarafından tartışılmaktadır. Tartışmaya katılanların birçoğu savaşın gerekçesi olarak Rus liderliğini ve özellikle Rusya Devlet Başkanı Vladimir Putin'i gösterirken, bazıları ise Batılı ülkeleri, özellikle de ABD'yi, NATO'nun doğuya doğru genişlemesi ve Rusya'nın güvenlik kaygılarını göz ardı etmeleri nedeniyle eleştirmektedir. Farklı akademik ve siyasi arka planlara sahip Çinli aydınlar da bu tartışmalara katılarak Ukrayna'daki savaş ve Çin'in nasıl bir politika izlemesi gerektiği konusunda değerlendirmelerde bulunmuşlardır. Dünya siyasetindeki artan varlığı nedeniyle hem Çin'in savaş karşısındaki tutumunun hem de savaşla ilgili Çinli aydınlar arasında yaşanan tartışmaların takip ve analiz edilmesi gerekmektedir. Bu gereklilik doğrultusunda bu çalışma, Çinli aydınlar arasında Ukrayna'daki savaş ve Çin liderliğinin izlemesi gereken politikalar ile ilgili tartışmaları incelemektedir. Sonuç olarak bu çalışma, otoriter parti-devleti ile Çinli aydınlar arasındaki hassas ilişki nedeniyle Çinli aydınların Batı'daki aydınlara göre hassas bir konumda olduğunu savunmaktadır. Buna rağmen Çin devletinin savaş karşısında gösterdiği görece dengeli ve tarafsız duruş ve savaşta açıkça taraf tutmama kararı, Çinli aydınların hem savaş hem de Çin'in Rusya'nın saldırganlığına karşı tutumu hakkındaki düşüncelerini kamuoyu önünde paylaşmalarına zemin hazırlamıştır. Bununla birlikte Çin devleti, Moskova ile sahip olduğu yakın ilişki nedeniyle Çinli aydınların, özellikle de Rusya karşıtı görüşe sahip olanların, savaş hakkındaki görüşlerini paylaşmaları için yalnızca sınırlı bir alan açmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çin, Rusya, Ukrayna, Savaş, Çinli aydınlar

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## Introduction

On February 24, 2022, following President Vladimir Putin's address to the nation, Russia started its invasion of Ukraine (Fisher, 2022). The reasons and the impact of this war have been widely discussed by academics, politicians, journalists and diplomats worldwide. While many censure Russian leadership and in particular President Putin himself for the invasion (Kirby, 2022; Pomerantsev, 2022; Sky News, 2022; Vitvitsky, 2022; Wilkinson, 2022), some others criticize NATO for its eastward expansion and the Western countries for disregarding the outcomes of this expansion and the risks associated with it (Friedman 2022; Mearsheimer, 2022) or claim that Russia fell into the trap set by NATO and the US (Wade, 2022). Another widely discussed and criticized actor since the beginning of the invasion is China due to its approach to the war. Even though China, like the majority of the countries, is not directly involved and does not take sides in the war, many in the Western world -particularly the US administration and politicians- have been denouncing the relatively balanced and neutral position pursued by the Chinese state. [China officially stays neutral and does not take sides in the war (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). However, its neutrality is tilted towards the Russian side due to the close relationship between Moscow and Beijing and, in particular, between President Putin and President Xi Jinping.]

Russia's war in Ukraine has put Beijing in a delicate position. While Russia is an important strategic partner of China, its invasion of Ukraine is a direct challenge to the sovereignty and territorial integrity principles of the UN system that China values the most. As a result of the sufferings the country had to go through during the Century of Humiliation (1839-1949), Beijing is very sensitive to the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Notwithstanding this sensitivity, due to the country's "rock solid" relationship with Russia (Reuters, 2022b), the Chinese leadership refrained from openly criticizing and taking measures against Russia's aggression in Ukraine. On the other hand, again because of that sensitivity, similar to its approach to Russia's aggression in Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014, Beijing refrains from supporting Russia in its war, and indeed, it selectively complies with the sanctions put against Russia by the Western countries. This balanced approach of China is even admitted by President Putin in his remarks after a one-on-one meeting with President Xi on September 15, 2022: "We highly appreciate the balanced position of our Chinese friends in connection with the Ukrainian crisis... We understand your questions and concerns in this regard" (Troianovski and Bradsher, 2022).

This paper claims that despite China's close relations with Russia, the Chinese state's relatively balanced and neutral stance and decision of not openly taking sides in the war provided a ground for Chinese intellectuals to publicly share their thoughts about both the war itself and China's position towards Russia's aggression. In other words, notwithstanding the amity between Moscow and

Beijing, the Chinese state's decision of not diplomatically, economically and militarily supporting Russia created a space for some Chinese intellectuals to publicly criticize Russia and demand from their rulers to position themselves against Moscow and to stand by Ukraine. These intellectuals also asked their government to join Western countries in their efforts to economically and diplomatically punish Russia. However, as a reflection of the sensitive relationship between the party-state and Chinese intellectuals as well as the "relativeness" of China's neutrality in the war, this space provided by the state is not limitless. As, for the Chinese leadership, China has a "no limits friendship" with Russia (President of Russia, 2022), the Chinese state allows only a restricted space for intellectuals to share their views about the war. This is especially the case for the critical views that criticize the official position of the Chinese state towards the war as well as anti-Russia and pro-Ukraine rhetoric.

The boundaries set by the Chinese state are rigorously implemented by the Chinese censorship mechanism. When this mechanism detects critical or unfavourable comments by Chinese intellectuals or citizens, it immediately censors them. For example, on March 15, 2022, US-China Perception Monitor's English and Chinese websites were blocked after they published Hu Wei's critical views on Russia's aggression and Beijing's policy towards the war. Many Weibo accounts were also suspended by the censorship mechanism as users of these accounts shared content supporting Ukraine or criticizing Russia and its aggression. At times, some ardent pro-Russian accounts were taken down by the censors as well (Safeguard Defenders, 2022). The way this censorship mechanism works on Russia-Ukraine news coverage was mistakenly revealed in a leaked document by Horizon News, a news outlet owned by the CPC. According to the document, news outlets were instructed not to publish content that are pro-Western and unfavourable to Russia (Kuo, 2022). Despite this strict censorship mechanism, in a relatively short period before being censored by the state, these critical views could be shared by many both within China and the international community. Therefore, they could offer alternative views to the ones in the mainstream/state media outlets. These voices are also important to show that despite the state's strong control over mainstream as well as social media, critical views can find ways to overcome this control and reach a wide audience.

In this context, this paper aims to provide an overview of the debates among Chinese intellectuals about the Russia-Ukraine war. To do so, it will critically analyse and compare Chinese intellectuals' discourse on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In other words, the study benefits from critical discourse analysis, which sees discourse as a historical and ideological process and explores the relationship between discourse/knowledge and power/power structures (Van Dijk, 2008, 2014). The paper is divided into three parts. The first part discusses China's

official position towards the war in Ukraine. The second part analyses Chinese intellectuals' views of the war in three subheadings: intellectuals with critical views, intellectuals with pro-Russia views and pro-neutrality intellectuals. The intellectuals under consideration in this paper are some of the most prominent public intellectuals in China and therefore, are regarded as representative voices for each group of intellectuals. Finally, the conclusion makes an evaluation of the views of these intellectuals and their relationship with the Chinese state's position towards the war.

### China's Official Position on the War in Ukraine

China's stance towards the Ukraine war has been one of the most debated issues since even before the war started in February 2022. The meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin on the side lines of the Winter Olympics on February 4, 2022, has led many to claim that China was informed by Putin about Russia's intention of invading Ukraine and that Russia asked for economic and military support from China before the invasion began (Wong and Barnes, 2022). However, the position taken by Beijing against the war is much more cautious than suggested by such claimants. China has been following a relatively balanced and neutral attitude towards the war. Beijing, on the one hand, supports Moscow's discourse that the eastward expansion of NATO has increased Russia's insecurity, which in the end led Russia to attack Ukraine. On the other hand, despite this rhetorical support, Beijing does not provide economic and military support to Moscow. Quite the contrary, it complies with, albeit selectively, the sanctions implemented by Western states although it criticizes them for these sanctions (Huang and Lardy, 2022; Ramzy, 2022).

In line with its relatively balanced approach to the war, although the Beijing administration does not officially condemn Russia's intervention in Ukraine, as opposed to Moscow's use of the term "special operation", China defines the situation as a war (Nigam, 2022) and tries to take a relatively neutral stance. Despite some reports in the Western media that China was informed about the war and requested it to be postponed until the end of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics (Wong and Barnes, 2022), the existence of more than 6,000 Chinese citizens in Ukraine, who were not advised to leave the country and hence caught in the war, suggests that the Chinese authorities were not informed about the invasion beforehand (South China Morning Post, 2022).

This was also emphasized by the Chinese authorities. Chinese officials, including its Ambassador to the US Qin Gang, have many times stated that China had no prior knowledge of the war and if it had it would have made efforts to prevent the war. For example, in a Washington Post article published on March 15, 2022, Qin elaborates on Beijing's attitude towards the Ukraine crisis as well as its response to these allegations. Ambassador Qin states that China is the largest trading partner both of Ukraine

and Russia and the largest importer of oil and natural gas in the world. This is why the war is of no use to China. On the contrary, the war and its side effects on manufacturing and trade hurt the Chinese economy. Therefore, the best outcome for China is to end the war as soon as possible (2022). Furthermore, Qin states, China follows an independent and peaceful foreign policy without taking any sides, and its stance in the face of the crisis is very clear: "The purposes and principles of the U.N. Charter must be fully observed; the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, including Ukraine, must be respected; the legitimate security concerns of all countries must be taken seriously; and all efforts that are conducive to the peaceful settlement of the crisis must be supported" (2022).

Many in the West, however, find China's approach hypocritical and criticize the Beijing administration for remaining silent and tacitly supporting Moscow in its war against Ukraine. Some administrators from the Western world, especially the representatives of the US administration, demand China openly condemn Russia and warn Beijing not to violate the sanctions imposed on Russia. Otherwise, they state, China might be confronted with secondary sanctions (Denti, Martina and Shalal, 2022; Shalal, Martina and Brunnstrom, 2022).

Despite such warnings by the US and other members of the Western world for China not to help Russia in its attempts to evade sanctions, Beijing displays a selective approach to those sanctions put by the West. For example, according to a statement made by an official from the Russian aviation agency, China refused to supply aircraft parts to Russian airlines (Reuters, 2022a). In another example, Chinese Sinopec suspended its petrochemical and natural gas investments in Russia (Aizhu, Zhu and Xu, 2022). On the other hand, at a time when big Chinese companies struggle to do business in the Russian market, China's Ambassador to Russia Zhang Hanhui made a call to small and medium-sized Chinese companies already doing business in Russia to fill the gaps left by Western companies as soon as possible (Bloomberg News, 2022). In short, while China opposes sanctions at a discursive level, it, on the one hand, partially participates in the Western-based international sanctions and, on the other hand, tries to take advantage of the vacuum that emerged in the Russian market (Ramzy, 2022). With this selective approach, Beijing tries to follow a delicate balancing strategy of trying not to offend Russia as well as the Western world.

### Chinese Intellectuals' Views on the War in Ukraine

While some Chinese public intellectuals support the relatively balanced stance of the Chinese state, many others prefer to take a clearer position in the face of the crisis and demand their leaders pick a side rather than staying "neutral". However, this second group of Chinese intellectuals diverges in their suggestions on which side to support. While nationalistic intellectuals who have close contact with the CPC and the state counsel officials to side

with Russia and support that country in the war, liberally-minded intellectuals who can or do distance themselves, at least moderately, from the state and the Party suggest to favour Ukraine and support those measures taken against Russia. Still, many others advise the state to continue with its current neutral and non-committal policy.

This part of the paper provides an overview of these three positions by focusing on some of the most prominent and outspoken intellectuals on the issue of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It first deals with the views that take critical positions against the war and the Chinese state's position towards it. Afterward, it takes pro-Russia views into account by looking at three journalists who are directly related to state media. Finally, it evaluates the views of pro-neutrality intellectuals who wholeheartedly support the Chinese state's balanced policy against the war.

### *Intellectuals with critical views about the war*

This section surveys the views of four academic intellectuals: historian Xu Guoqi, political scientist Qin Hui, sociologist Sun Liping and political scientist Hu Wei. Despite their different academic backgrounds, these four leading public intellectuals have taken similar positions, openly criticized Russia's war in Ukraine and suggested the Chinese government oppose Russia's aggression and side with Ukraine and the international community. Due to their critical stances, Xu, Hu and Sun's critical views were censored by the Chinese censorship mechanism.

Noting that Russia's invasion was a clear violation of the United Nations (UN) Charter and the international security system, World War I historian Xu Guoqi from Hong Kong University thinks that the Chinese rulers were "deceived by Putin". Stating that humanity has not learned sufficient lessons from the tragedies in the past, Xu indicates that he is afraid that the Russia-Ukraine War will progress to a point of no return, just like the First World War. According to him, China has been a beneficiary of the international order and could become a prosperous country thanks to that order. Therefore, China should not be a part of an international tragedy that could harm its own future as well as the international order, world peace and development. Instead, it should prove its role as a responsible stakeholder in the current world order and oppose Russia's aggression (Ni, 2022).

Worried that China will be drawn into a great catastrophe that will deeply affect the whole world, Xu, with four other Chinese historians, candidly criticized Russia's invasion of Ukraine in an open letter published on the internet. In the letter, which was blocked in China by the Chinese authorities, Sun Jiang (Nanjing University), Wang Lixin (Peking University), Zhong Weimin (Tsinghua University), Chen Yan (Fudan University) and Xu wrote, "As citizens of a country that has suffered from ravages, broken families, starving people, and been compelled to give up part of its national territory... we share the pain of the Ukrainian people as if it were our own" (Cowhig, 2022), reminding the sufferings the Chinese people

experienced during the Century of Humiliation (1839-1949). Stating that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a violation of the UN Charter and jeopardizes international security, Chinese historians demanded Russia halt its attacks against Ukraine and solve its problems with Kyiv through diplomacy (Cowhig, 2022).

In his seven pieces long Ukraine series, Qin Hui, one of China's leading liberal public intellectuals and an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Government and Public Administration at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, gave the strongest reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as well as to the West's weak reaction to Russia. Qin, who criticizes the "double standard" of the West and the international community by referring to the events in Cambodia and Rwanda, states that Putin has "only one standard" and this standard is whether he is happy or not. Therefore, Putin thinks that he is free to intervene if he is not happy with the developments and this is what he has been doing in Ukraine (Qin, 2022a). Qin likens the annexation of Crimea to Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland region in 1938, despite the clear differences between the two events. He also states, if Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 can be likened to the invasion of Sudetenland, then Ukraine's ongoing invasion by Russia can be likened to Poland's invasion in 1939 by Nazi Germany (Qin, 2022a, 2022b).

With a similar approach, Qin criticizes the recent policies of President Biden and the Western states by comparing their policies to the appeasement policy of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain before the Second World War and says that this policy paves the way for Putin's aggressive policies. According to Qin, although Britain and France followed a policy of appeasement for a long time in the 1930s, they eventually entered the war against Germany in 1939. Today's US and Europe, however, cannot dare to intervene militarily because they are afraid of Russia. Therefore, the appeasement policy of the US and Europe in 2022 is much worse than the appeasement policy of Britain and France before 1939 (Qin, 2022b). However, Qin claims, as an overall strategy, appeasement of the West did never totally end in 1939. After World War II, and even during the war, a new appeasement strategy was put in place, but this time against the Soviet Union. Here, Qin reminds Chinese people, especially the contemporary Maoists who support Putin and Russia in the war, that even Chairman Mao criticized both the appeasement strategy of the West after the Sino-Soviet split and the Soviet Union for its hegemonic behaviour. In short, for Qin, the West has a long history of appeasing its totalitarian opponents. However, today at least half of the world is under totalitarian governments and democracies need to unite against the rising tide of totalitarianism (Qin, 2022e). Nevertheless, Qin adds that the Western leaders' appeasement strategy against Russia started to change, albeit slowly, after the Bucha massacre in March 2022. The brutality of the massacre shocked the world and led Western leaders to begin supporting the Ukrainian army by providing tanks and other military equipment (Qin,

2022d). This massacre also changed Qin's earlier views on Putin and the Russian army. Previously, he held the view that Putin and the Russian army were not as bad as Hitler and the German SS. However, the Bucha massacre showed Qin that he was wrong and the Russian army could also be as brutal as the SS (2022c).

Hu Wei, who has organic ties to the Chinese state as the Vice Chairman of the Public Policy Research Center of the Counsellor's Office of the State Council and the Chairman of the Shanghai Public Policy Research Institution, is another intellectual who supports the idea that China should not support Putin, but the Western world. Instead, Beijing should develop a flexible approach to the Russia-Ukraine War and make choices that fit China's long-term national interests. According to Hu, the war in Ukraine is the most serious conflict since the end of the Second World War and will have worldwide consequences that outpace the September 11, 2001 attacks against the US. First, the war may create the conditions for a united West under the leadership of the US. So, unlike what many in China predict, the war would not result in the end of US hegemony, but instead, would cause the reinstallation of US leadership in the Western world. Second, a united West will divide the world into the camps of democracy and autocracy and intensify its efforts of building a united front of democracies (Hu, 2022).

Saying that the war is a big and costly mistake for Russia, Hu claims that if China does not take proactive measures, once Putin loses power at home, China will face the threat of being isolated and contained by the US and the Western states in general. In such a case, China will not only be militarily surrounded by US-led structures such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and AUKUS [AUKUS is the security pact established between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.] but will also be confronted by Western systems and values. Furthermore, Europe might distance itself from China, Japan might become a willing supporter of the anti-China camp and South Korea might also join this camp. According to Hu, such a division, in the end, might create the conditions for a divided world and countries of the world might be forced to pick sides (2022).

For all these reasons, Hu states, Beijing should sever its ties with the Putin administration as soon as possible, abandon its neutral policy, stop playing both sides and prefer the mainstream approach in the world. China has been an ardent supporter of territorial integrity and national sovereignty. Therefore, staying neutral in this crisis does no good for China and, quite the contrary, creates the conditions of its isolation from the majority of the world. This way, Beijing might also change the pro-containment attitudes of many Americans and prevent the imposition of united sanctions by the West against itself. In short, according to Hu, China's top priority should be to show the world that it is a responsible major power, improve its relations with the Western world and avoid

isolation and containment and thus and so, fulfil its long-term interests (2022).

Sun Liping, a professor of sociology at Tsinghua University, another liberal-minded intellectual, has similar views to Hu. Sun sees Russia's attack on Ukraine as one of the most significant events in the post-Cold War era. However, from a broader perspective, it is just a small chess game (Sun, 2022b). Defining today's world as two post-eras (post-epidemic and post-globalization), which means that the world order is in a process of reorganization (Sun, 2022a), Sun is of the opinion that Russia, with an economic size smaller than China's Guangdong province, is no longer a major actor in the world order. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the outcome of this reality, but it will not change Russia's position in the world, and in the end, it will "at best [be] a pawn in the grand scheme of things" (Sun, 2022b). In other words, Russia is not a power that can rival the US.

Instead, according to Sun, the world is witnessing another confrontation, the one between China and the US. This, however, will take the form of an "economic war of attrition", in which each side will try to weaken the other side economically while trying to further its own development. Such an economic war is already underway in the Ukraine crisis as the West sanctions Russia. If, Sun claims, China did not intervene and continue to import oil and natural gas from Russia, these sanctions could cripple the Russian economy. On the other hand, Russia's invasion of Ukraine paved the way for the unification of the Western world under an anti-Russia coalition. Sun thinks that, since Russia is not a major power anymore, if this unification of the Western world is successful, its main target will not be Russia, but China. Therefore, he suggests Chinese leaders pay attention to such an alliance and act accordingly (2022b).

#### *Intellectuals with pro-Russia views*

Another group of intellectuals who expressed an opinion on the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine are journalists Hu Xijin, Ming Jinwei and Lin Zhibao. These three nationalistic intellectuals share a similar background since all worked for and are still writing opinion pieces in the state media. Furthermore, contrary to the previous four academic intellectuals, Hu, Ming and Lin support the idea that the main culprit of the war is the US and NATO, Russia's actions are to safeguard its security and the Chinese state should not criticize and distance itself from Moscow. In line with the position taken by the Chinese state, these intellectuals support the idea that Beijing should continue to support Russia at least morally while not resulting in a premature rivalry with the West because in a future conflict with the US, China might need the support of Russia.

Hu Xijin, the former editor-in-chief of the Global Times [Global Times is a tabloid newspaper and People's Daily is China's largest newspaper group. Both are owned by the CPC] blames the US and the Western-backed Ukraine government for the war. According to him, the eastern expansion of NATO has led Russia to act for its national

security and to stop its retreat against the West that started with the end of the Cold War (2022a). Hu claims this is a confrontation between Russia and the US and therefore, “The shells that fell on Ukraine are also Russia’s spit in the face of Washington” (2022a). Since the war is a challenge to the US power, it will have an impact on Europe, if not on the world. However, due to its limited power capacity, Russia’s challenge to the US is a narrow challenge, and therefore, if successful against Ukraine, it can only change the way Russia is treated by the West. If unsuccessful, this war in Ukraine might end up with a colour revolution and alter the government in Moscow. Such an outcome would also empower the US hegemony and the unity of the West. In short, the war will have a long-term impact on the international order and on Chinese interests. Therefore, for Hu, China is concerned about its outcome and should follow the developments very carefully (2022b).

Hu is very critical of those intellectuals who support the idea of abandoning Russia and siding with the West. He criticizes such intellectuals as naïve, accuses them of delusion and claims that such views are marginal and have no influence either over the Chinese society or the Chinese policy makers. Instead, per Hu, Chinese society sees Russia as a crucial partner in China’s confrontational relationship with the US. Accordingly, there is a mutual strategic relationship between China and Russia in which they stand back to back. In addition, Hu thinks that the number one strategic rival of the US is not Russia, but China. As long as Beijing partners with Moscow, it has nothing to fear from this rivalry because Russia provides vast amounts of energy and agricultural products to China. This trade relationship between the two countries is of great importance for China’s energy and food security if it is contained by the US in the future. Moreover, Russia is a significant nuclear power. Therefore, if China distances itself from Russia, it will stand alone in the face of economic, political and military pressure from the US. Even worse, if Moscow joins the US camp, China might face a two-front confrontation. However, if China acts with Russia in the long run, it will be much more difficult for the US to pressure China because Chinese and Russian power complement each other. For all these reasons, according to Hu, the policy followed by the Beijing administration in the face of the crisis is correct and Beijing should continue its attitude towards the crisis (2022c).

Another relatively pro-Russia, or at least anti-US voice, is Ming Jinwei, the former senior editor at Xinhua News Agency. [Xinhua News Agency is China’s official news agency.] For Ming, the Ukraine crisis was caused by the steps taken by the US. In other words, the culprit of the crisis is the US, not Russia because the actions taken by the US-led NATO in the post-Cold War period led Russia to feel insecure and this, in the end, led Moscow to take the necessary measures to safeguard its security and dignity as well as the security of the Russians living in eastern Ukraine. However, some people in China, who are influenced by the US media, put the blame on Russia. In

other words, the ones who accuse Russia of “invading Ukraine”, according to Ming, do not grasp the situation properly because their views are distorted by the US worldview (2022).

Ming states that to protect its national interest, China needs to play a balancing game between Russia, the US and the EU. China can avoid getting drawn into trouble by only properly managing its relations with these parties and clearly explaining its position in the crisis. First of all, Beijing needs to make its attitude clear: Russia’s legitimate security concerns as well as Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected. This crisis is a very important test for Sino-Russian relations and a very delicate situation for Russia as it is isolated from the West. Therefore, Beijing needs to show Moscow that it understands Russia’s legitimate security concerns and to a certain degree supports Russia. This is important because when in the future China overcomes the Taiwan problem and engages in a rivalry with the US, it will also need Russia’s understanding and support. In the meantime, China should also not neglect the US and the EU. However, while dealing with these two powers, Beijing should talk more and act less. If the actions taken by these powers do not conflict with its interests, there is no need for China to directly object to their moves. In short, according to Ming, Beijing should play a delicate balancing game and while morally supporting Moscow, it should refrain from irritating the US and the EU. In other words, China needs to stabilize its relations with Russia so that Russia will not collapse, with the US so that the two countries will not engage in a premature rivalry, and with the EU so that Brussels and Beijing will be able to maintain their cooperation and not engage in a rivalry (2022).

Lin Zhibao, the chief of the People’s Daily Sichuan Bureau, is yet another pro-Russia commentator. According to him, Russia tries to achieve three goals with its war in Ukraine. It aims to overcome anti-Russianism in Ukraine, respond to NATO’s eastward expansion and challenge the US hegemony. Even though Chinese people sympathize with the Ukrainian people, since China and Russia are very close strategic partners and when one is threatened the other is also threatened, Beijing should morally support Moscow and hope that Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine, which is run by corrupt and traitorous pro-American people, will be successful. Lin is famous for his Maoist views and criticizes the intellectuals who oppose all wars without distinguishing them as just and unjust wars. For him, wars against oppression are just wars, and without such wars, people could never achieve independence and peace. While Russia’s attack against an independent state can be seen as a violation of the UN Charter, there is also the Heavenly Principles (*Tianli*, 天理), which is the supreme law. When the two contradict each other, rather than the UN law, the Heavenly Principles should be followed to judge whether an action is right or wrong. Accordingly, Lin attacks those public intellectuals who indiscriminately oppose all wars by claiming that such intellectuals are not anti-war and peace lovers, but instead anti-Russia and US lovers. Therefore, he claims

that such intellectuals are immoral and unreasonable intellectuals who are unqualified to discuss the ongoing war in Ukraine (2022).

Lin claims that Russia's war in Ukraine is a prelude to Moscow's challenge to the US hegemony and construction of a just new international order. China and Russia are the only two countries with the potential and the will to challenge the US hegemony. Therefore, Washington first needs to deal with Russia, so that it can afterwards focus its attention on, contain and weaken China and maintain its hegemony. To that end, the US uses Ukraine as a proxy in its efforts to prostrate Russia. Despite this, according to Lin, the war in Ukraine provides an advantage for China because since the war started, the US reduced its pressure on China and focused more on Russia. Furthermore, due to sanctions put on Russia, the US cannot partner with it against China anymore. Quite the contrary, due to its isolation from the West, Russia's relations with China is strengthening. In due course, China's relations with other countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey and even India can also develop. Finally, the war in Ukraine has provided an opportunity for China to learn how to settle the Taiwan issue and overcome Western sanctions. For all these reasons, Lin states, China should side with the "lesser of two evils" and stand against the US (2022).

#### ***Pro-neutrality Intellectuals***

The final group of intellectuals whose views will be analysed in this paper are political scientist Zheng Yongnian, International Relations scholar Yan Xuetong, political scientist Cui Zhiyuan and urban planner Zhao Yanjing. These prominent intellectuals have different academic backgrounds and provide diversified opinions than the previous two groups, especially on how to position China in its relations with both the West and Russia. Despite important differences in their reasoning, according to these intellectuals, China should continue its balancing strategy and should not be siding with either Russia or the West. Instead, Beijing should stay committed to the UN principles, keep its relations with all parties and continue its policy of opening up to the world.

Zheng Yongnian, a lecturer at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, claims that the international order established after the Second World War is about to collapse and that the politics of strong leaders is once again popular among the great powers of the world and Putin is one of these strong leaders. In line with this policy, leaders of powerful states aim to build new regional as well as -if possible- international systems that would place their country at the centre. Zheng claims that for a long time, Russia under Putin's strongman politics has been trying to control Belarus and Ukraine and this way, aiming to establish a "Mini-Soviet Union". However, the primary reason for Russia's aggressive actions is NATO's eastward expansion that began in the late 1990s. This expansion is the outcome of misconceptions of the US and Western rulers as to why the Soviet Union collapsed. While the Soviet Union, per Zheng, collapsed due to its internal

contradictions, Westerners interpreted it as the absolute victory of the Western liberal order against socialism. As a result of this wrong assessment, the "American empire" and NATO expanded excessively, which in the end, increased Russia's security concerns (2022).

For Zheng, the end of the Cold War started the process of the decline of the old world order and the emergence of a new one. This new international order has been developing on two lines. The first has developed as a result of NATO's eastward expansion, especially of the possibility of Georgia's and Ukraine's membership, and the rising insecurity of Russia as an outcome. The second line is the rise of China and the way this rise has been interpreted by the US. Like Sun Liping, Zheng thinks Washington sees China as its main competitor. This can be seen in the China policies of all US presidents since George W. Bush: Barack Obama initiated the Pivot to Asia strategy and Donald Trump transformed it into an Indo-Pacific strategy and launched aggressive economic, scientific and technological policies. Today, the Biden administration is following policies that bring together the China policies of both the Obama and Trump administrations and building military alliances such as the QUAD and AUKUS to contain China (Global Times, 2022; Zheng, 2022).

However, according to Zheng, the Russia-Ukraine War caused the US to turn its attention back to Europe. This creates an opportunity for China to catch a break. If China follows careful policies and does not make devastating strategic mistakes, its economic development cannot be hindered by the US, and it can play a much more important role in the emergent world order, which seems to be a complex pluralist order centred on several regional powers like Germany and France in Europe, India in South Asia and Turkey in the Middle East rather than a single hegemonic power. In this new decentralized world order, rather than dominating the ideological sphere, Western liberalism will be coexisting with other ideologies and there will be no superpowers but only regional and major powers (Global Times, 2022; Zheng, 2022).

During these complicated times, per Zheng, China should analyse the current situation and be watchful. Ultimately, a great power is recognized by others as such a power not because of its ability to challenge the old order, but due to its contribution to the maintenance of international peace. To overcome this crisis successfully, China needs to maintain the balance between its national security and openness to the outside world. Therefore, the biggest security threat for China would be to cut its ties with the outside world because as long as China continues to be an integral part of the international system, in case of a crisis, it will not be possible for the West to exclude China from the international economic and political system. In other words, China should continue its opening up to the outside world and Chinese companies should keep going global (Global Times, 2022).

Yan Xuetong, professor of International Relations at Tsinghua University, has a similar approach to the Ukraine war as well as to China-US relations. According to Yan, the war has important economic, political and societal

impacts on China. It has already negatively affected China's international trade, strained its relations with its East Asian neighbours and politically divided the Chinese public into pro-China and pro-Ukraine camps. By disrupting commodities markets and global supply chains, the war in Ukraine has lowered the country's industrial production and led to a decline in its exports. Due to these problems, Chinese companies have so far lost billions of US dollars. The war has also resulted in a deterioration of China's relations with several of its neighbours. The intensification of the rivalry between China and the US has led Asian states to play a balancing game between these two powers. The ongoing war in Ukraine has resulted in some of these states to move closer to the US. Furthermore, the US use the war as a pretext for providing additional military aid to Taiwan. The war has also divided Chinese society into pro-Russia and pro-Ukraine camps. The pro-Ukraine camp reminded the Chinese society of the Treaty of Aigun in 1858 which resulted in the loss of an important share of Chinese territory to Russia. Such propaganda has the potential to increase anti-Russian feelings in Chinese society (Yan, 2022).

In addition to these problems, Yan states, the war has put China in a delicate position with regard to its relations with the US and Russia and has resulted in the country to follow a balanced strategy towards the war. China, on the one hand, does not want to antagonize Russia, its largest and most powerful neighbour. On the other hand, Beijing also does not want to strengthen the US' hands in its efforts to contain China. For Yan, however, this balancing strategy has damaged its relations with the US and its allies like Britain and Australia, which warned China not to evade sanctions put by the Western states on Russia. Nevertheless, Chinese leaders think that siding with the US would not improve the two countries' bilateral relations and even such a pro-US policy would not result in a change in the US' containment policy against China. Quite the contrary, it would encourage Washington to impose secondary sanctions against China (Yan, 2022).

For all these reasons, according to Yan, China should continue its balanced strategy until the war is over. Due to its Cold War memories, China does not want to be caught in the middle of Russia and the US once again. From 1958 to 1971, to prepare for a war with the Soviet Union and the US, China devoted a significant share of its resources to military build-up, which negatively affected its economic development. Therefore, since the war in Ukraine started in February 2022, Chinese officials tried to refrain from provoking Russia, while simultaneously declaring its support for the principles of UN-based international order and remaining neutral in the crisis. This middle path provided China with a space to continue its economic relations with Russia while refusing to provide military support. This is a similar type of policy followed by some US partners like India as well. For China, maintaining a peaceful environment continues to be the key goal, and therefore, as long as Taiwan refrains from declaring *de jure* independence China will stay committed to its path of peaceful development (Yan, 2022).

Cui Zhiyuan, a professor at the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University, defends China's neutral policy based on the concept of "security dilemma" and China's "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence". Cui states that the primary reason behind Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine is the idea of "security dilemma", which is one of the basic concepts in International Relations theory. The defensive measures taken by a state to enhance its own security can be interpreted as offensive by other states and this (mis)perception might result in other states to take defensive measures to increase their own security, which in the end, results in a security dilemma. Cui views NATO's eastward expansion and the steps taken by Russia in reaction to NATO's actions as a good illustration of the concept of security dilemma. From this perspective, the security concerns of all states are legitimate. Therefore, both Russia and former Eastern Bloc countries view their own moves as legitimate and the other side's steps as aggressive (Cui, 2022).

Cui links the idea of security dilemma to the practice of establishing "spheres of influence". Referring to the example of the post-Vienna Congress European politics in the 19th century, Cui states that European great powers' response to security dilemma was to establish spheres of influence that are recognized by all great powers so that each power would respect others' spheres and this way, the likelihood of conflicts would decrease. According to Cui, however, China has no sense of establishing spheres of influence. This is clearly reflected in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which accepts all nations as equals, irrespective of their sizes. This thinking, per Cui, provides the basis of China's policy of neutrality in the current crisis and its abstention in the UN votes on Crimea in 2014 and on Ukraine in 2022 (2022).

Unlike the claims that China's policy is unprincipled, Cui states that Beijing's approach to the issue is indeed highly principled and shows that it has grasped the way security dilemma works. Because China understands the legitimate security concerns of each side, it did not choose a side in the UN voting and abstained. Furthermore, China's diplomatic approach rejects the idea of constructing spheres of influence. Instead, Cui offers another solution that he takes from the theory of Constructivism: overcoming mutual mistrust among states by incrementally building mechanisms to enhance trust. Hence, in this particular case, the way of resolving the problem at hand is to establish mutual trust mechanisms between NATO and Russia (Cui, 2022).

Another scholar who favours a neutral position for China is Zhao Yanjing, a professor of urban planning at Xiamen University. While Zhao supports the idea that China should never pick a side in the Ukraine crisis, his reasoning is quite different from Zheng, Yan or Cui. Unlike many others who view the war as a fight against Russia and the US or NATO, Zhao thinks that this is a war between two rival factions within the US. Namely, this is a war between the pro-globalization Wall Street and the capital faction versus the anti-globalization military-industrial



complex and the labour faction. In this struggle, according to Zhao, China should support the capital faction because China, with the US, is the winner of globalization. For him, these two economic powers complement each other; China brings in the world's cheapest labour while the US brings in the world's cheapest capital. Therefore, all other major countries support Trump and the anti-globalization faction, so that China and the US would fall apart. This includes Russia under Putin because as long as Trump stayed in power, China would be focusing on maritime power and this would offer space for Russia as a territorial power (Zhao, 2022).

The primary reason why the US encouraged Russia and Ukraine to go to war, according to Zhao, is to keep Russia apart from Europe because a post-Putin Russia would not turn to China or the US, but to Europe. Therefore, the Biden administration's strategy is to break Moscow's ties to the European capital that wants to benefit from Russian energy sources as well as the tie between the Trump faction, Europe and Russia. Zhao claims that a post-Putin Russia's engagement with Europe would be the US' biggest nightmare and that's why Washington aims to prevent such an engagement. This is also the case for China. Therefore, in this war, China and the US are on the same side (Zhao, 2022).

Per Zhao, if not Biden but Trump won the 2020 elections in the US, then the war would not take place in Ukraine but in the Taiwan Strait. However, unlike Trump, Biden represents Wall Street which has strong ties to and is a friend of China. Therefore, China and Biden are allied against Trump and the faction he represents. In line with this argument, Zhao punches the ones who advise to support Putin in the war as strategically short-sighted because, for him, Putin is only a pawn in Biden's bid to overcome Trump and pawns are not to be supported but only to be used. China, on the other hand, is a great power and a chess master. If Trump once again becomes the president, Russia would do the same and not support China and instead, would stay aside. For all these reasons, Zhao states, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is in the interest of China. As long as it stays neutral, China can mediate between the two sides and gain from this war. Unlike those who state that a neutral position is not the right and good thing to do, this is what the US did in both World Wars and during Japan's invasion of China. That's why, China should learn from the US and benefit from this war (Zhao, 2022).

## Conclusion

Russian aggression in Ukraine has put China in a delicate position. While Russia is an important strategic partner of China, its invasion of Ukraine is a direct challenge to the sovereignty principle of the UN system that China values the most. As a result of the sufferings the country had to go through during the Century of Humiliation (1839-1949), Beijing is very sensitive to the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Despite this sensitivity, due to the country's "rock solid"

relationship with Russia (Reuters, 2022b), the Chinese leadership could not openly criticize and take measures against Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. On the other hand, due to that sensitivity, Beijing does not support Russia in its war and indeed, it selectively complies with some of the sanctions put against Russia by the Western countries. This relatively balanced and neutral position of the Chinese state created a space for Chinese intellectuals to openly express their views on the war as well as on the policies the Chinese leadership should follow. While some intellectuals support the government's neutral stance, some other intellectuals support the Russian position and demand the government at least morally support Moscow in the war. Many others, on the other hand, fervently criticize Russia and especially Putin and ask the Chinese state to abandon Russia and side with the Western world.

The fact that Chinese intellectuals have such diverse views on the Russia-Ukraine war and that they can share them in public spaces that appeal to large audiences shows that although China has an authoritarian government based on a one-party system, public intellectuals from different backgrounds and with different worldviews can hold certain discussions in public. However, it should be noted that the fact that the Chinese state has not yet taken a clear stance against the Ukraine crisis has an important role in this freedom. In other words, the state's relatively neutral and balanced approach paves the way for public intellectuals to express their views, even when they challenge the mainstream position of the state. Nevertheless, this space provided by the Chinese state to public intellectuals is limited. The boundaries set by the Chinese state are rigorously implemented by the Chinese censorship mechanism. When this mechanism detects comments by Chinese intellectuals or citizens that are regarded as unfavourable by the Chinese state, it immediately censors them. Still, despite this censorship mechanism, these critical and "unfavourable" views can be shared by many both within China and the international community in a relatively short period before being censored by the state. Therefore, these views can offer alternatives to the ones in the mainstream/state media outlets. These voices are also important to show that despite the state's strong control over the mainstream as well as social media, critical views can find venues to overcome this control and offer valuable non-mainstream views and breathing space from government propaganda to the Chinese public.

## Extended Abstract

On February 24, 2022, following President Vladimir Putin's address to the nation, Russia began invading Ukraine. The reasons and the impact of this war have been widely discussed by academics, politicians, journalists and diplomats worldwide. While many censure Russian leadership and in particular President Putin himself for the invasion, others criticize NATO for its eastward expansion and the Western countries for disregarding the outcomes

of this expansion and the risks associated with it or claim that Russia fell into the trap set by NATO and the US. Another widely discussed and criticized actor since the beginning of the invasion is China due to its approach to the war. Even though China is not directly involved and does not take sides in the war, many in the Western world have denounced the relatively balanced and neutral position pursued by the Chinese state.

Russia's war in Ukraine has put Beijing in a delicate position. While Russia is an important strategic partner of China, its invasion of Ukraine is a direct challenge to the sovereignty and territorial integrity principles of the UN system that China values the most. As a result of the sufferings the country had to go through during the Century of Humiliation (1839-1949), Beijing is very sensitive to the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Notwithstanding this sensitivity, due to the country's close relationship with Russia, the Chinese leadership refrained from openly criticizing and taking measures against Russia's aggression in Ukraine. On the other hand, again because of that sensitivity, Beijing refrains from supporting Russia in its war and indeed, selectively complies with the sanctions put against Russia by the Western countries.

Despite the amity between Moscow and Beijing, the Chinese state's decision of not diplomatically, economically and militarily supporting Russia created a space for some Chinese intellectuals to publicly criticize Russia and demand from their rulers to position themselves against Moscow and stand by Ukraine. These intellectuals also asked their government to join Western countries in their efforts to economically and diplomatically punish Russia. However, as a reflection of the sensitive relationship between the party-state and Chinese intellectuals as well as the "relativeness" of China's neutrality in the war, this space provided by the state is not limitless. Because of Beijing's strong relations with Moscow, the Chinese state allows only a restricted space for intellectuals to share their views about the war. This is especially the case for the critical views that criticize the official position of the Chinese state towards the war as well as anti-Russia and pro-Ukraine rhetoric.

This paper overviews eleven intellectuals' perspectives on the Russia-Ukraine war and China's approach to the war under three groups: critical intellectuals, pro-Russia intellectuals and pro-neutrality intellectuals. These intellectuals are some of the most prominent public intellectuals in China and therefore, regarded as representative voices for each group of intellectuals.

Critical voices are represented by historian Xu Guoqi, political scientist Qin Hui, sociologist Sun Liping and political scientist Hu Wei. Despite their different academic backgrounds, they have taken similar positions by openly criticizing Russia's war in Ukraine and suggesting the Chinese government oppose Russia's aggression and side with Ukraine and the international community. According to Xu Guoqi, China has been a beneficiary of the international order and could become a prosperous country thanks to that order. Therefore, it should not be a

part of an international tragedy that could harm its own future as well as the international order. Instead, it should prove its role as a responsible stakeholder in the current world order and oppose Russia's aggression. Qin Hui, who has a very critical attitude towards Russia's aggression, likens the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland region in 1938 and Ukraine's ongoing invasion by Russia to Poland's invasion in 1939 by Nazi Germany. He also criticizes the US and Western European countries for appeasing Russia instead of supporting Ukraine militarily. He likens their attitudes to the appeasement strategy followed by Britain and France against Nazi Germany during the 1930s. Hu Wei, another critical voice, states that Beijing should develop a flexible approach to the Russia-Ukraine War and make choices that fit China's long-term national interests. According to him, the war created the conditions for a united front of democracies under the US leadership, which can isolate and contain China. Therefore, Beijing should sever its ties with the Putin administration as soon as possible, abandon its neutral policy, stop playing both sides and prefer the mainstream approach in the world. Finally, Sun Liping sees Russia's attack on Ukraine as one of the most important events in the post-Cold War era and states that the world order is in a process of reorganization. For him, Russia is not a power that can rival the US, but its invasion of Ukraine paved the way for the unification of the Western world under an anti-Russia coalition. The world is witnessing another confrontation, the one between China and the US. Sun thinks that, since Russia is not a major power anymore, if this unification of the Western world is successful, its main target will not be Russia, but China. Therefore, he suggests Chinese leaders pay attention to such an alliance and act accordingly.

Another group of intellectuals who expressed opinions on the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine are journalists Hu Xijin, Ming Jinwei and Lin Zhibao. Contrary to the previous four academic intellectuals, these three nationalistic intellectuals support the idea that the main culprit of the war is the US and NATO, Russia's actions are to safeguard its security and the Chinese state should not criticize and distance itself from Moscow. They support the idea that Beijing should continue to support Russia at least morally while not resulting in a premature rivalry with the West because in a future conflict with the US, China might need the support of Russia. Hu Xijin blames the US and the Western-backed Ukraine government for the war. For him, the eastern expansion of NATO led Russia to act for its own national security and to stop its retreat against the West which started with the end of the Cold War. According to Hu, if China acts with Russia in the long run, it will be much more difficult for the US to pressure China because Chinese and Russian power complement each other. Therefore, the policy followed by the Beijing administration in the face of the crisis is correct and Beijing should continue its attitude towards the crisis. Ming Jinwei thinks that the culprit of the crisis is the US. For him, to protect its national interest, China needs to play a balancing game between Russia, the US and the EU.

It can avoid getting drawn into trouble by only properly managing its relations with these parties and clearly explaining its position in the crisis. In this balancing game, while morally supporting Moscow, Beijing should refrain from irritating the US and the EU. Finally, Lin Zhibao claims that Russia tries to achieve three goals with its war in Ukraine. It aims to overcome anti-Russianism in Ukraine, respond to NATO's eastward expansion and challenge the US hegemony. According to Lin, Beijing should morally support Moscow and hope that Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, which is run by corrupt and traitorous pro-American people, will be successful.

The final group of intellectuals whose views are analysed in this paper is political scientist Zheng Yongnian, International Relations scholar Yan Xuetong, political scientist Cui Zhiyuan and urban planner Zhao Yanjing. These intellectuals have different academic backgrounds and provide diversified opinions than the previous two groups, especially on how to position China in its relations with both the West and Russia. Despite important differences in their reasoning, according to these intellectuals, China should continue its balancing and neutral strategy and should not be siding with either Russia or the West. Instead, Beijing should stay committed to the UN principles, keep its relations with all parties and continue its policy of opening up to the world. Zheng Yongnian claims that the overexpansion of NATO increased Russia's security concerns and this, in the end, created the conditions for the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, the end of the Cold War started the process of the decline of the old world order and the emergence of a new one. This new international order has been developing on two lines. The first has developed as a result of NATO's eastward expansion. The second line is the rise of China and the way this rise has been interpreted by the US. Zheng thinks that Washington sees China as its main competitor. If China follows careful policies and does not make devastating strategic mistakes, its economic development cannot be hindered by the US, and it can play a much more important role in the emergent world order. To overcome this crisis successfully, China needs to maintain the balance between its national security and openness to the outside world. Yan Xuetong has a similar approach to the Ukraine war as well as to China-US relations. For him, the war has put China in a delicate position with regard to its relations with the US and Russia and has resulted in the country to follow a balanced strategy towards the war. China, on the one hand, does not want to antagonize Russia, its largest and most powerful neighbour, and, on the other hand, does not want to strengthen the US' hands in its efforts to contain China. That's why, according to Yan, China should continue its balanced strategy until the war is over. Cui Zhiyuan defends China's neutral policy based on the concept of "security dilemma" and China's "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence". He states that from the perspective of security dilemma, the security concerns of all states are legitimate. Therefore, both Russia and former Eastern Bloc countries view their own moves as

legitimate and the other side's steps as aggressive. Cui states that Beijing's approach to the issue is indeed highly principled and shows that it has grasped the way security dilemma works. Because China understands the legitimate security concerns of each side, it did not choose a side in the UN voting and abstained. Finally, Zhao Yanjing also favours a neutral position for China. However, his reasoning is different from the previous three intellectuals. Zhao thinks that this is a war between two rival factions within the US. Namely, this is a war between the pro-globalization Wall Street and the capital faction versus the anti-globalization military-industrial complex and the labour. In this struggle, according to Zhao, China should support the capital faction because China, with the US, is the winner of globalization. In this war, China and the US are on the same side and Russia's invasion of Ukraine is in the interest of China. As long as it stays neutral, China can mediate between the two sides and gain from this war.

As can be seen from the discussions made by Chinese intellectuals with diverse views on the Russia-Ukraine war, despite China's censorship mechanism, even critical and "unfavourable" views can be shared by many both within China and the international community in a relatively short period before being censored by the state. These debates and especially divergent views can offer alternatives to the ones in the mainstream/state media outlets. These voices are also important to show that despite the state's strong control over the mainstream as well as social media, critical views can find venues to overcome this control and offer valuable non-mainstream views and breathing space from government propaganda to the Chinese public.

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