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Research article

'Global Transformation': Chinese Scholars Debate the International System in the Aftermath of the War in Ukraine (2022–2024)

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Abstract
This article explores discussions among Chinese International Relations scholars on the implications of the war in Ukraine for the international system. While official Chinese foreign policy rhetoric is often vaguely centred around obscure slogans, scholarly debates can be used as a 'proxy measure' to gain insights on the prevailing views in Chinese policy communities. This article identifies three main trends in Chinese scholarly discussions: 'campification' of great power politics, increasing de-globalisation and the ascent of the 'Global South'. The article analyses Chinese perceptions of the implications of these trends for the United States, Europe, Russia and the developing world.

Keywords: *China, war in Ukraine, grand strategy, international relations*

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Introduction
As the war in Ukraine drags on, the international system is going through a period of significant transformation though great uncertainty about its future shape remains. Yet, paradoxically, the war in Ukraine is simultaneously provid-

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ing massive volumes of unique information on the strategic capabilities of great powers and coalitions. Wars, after all, can be seen as the ultimate 'stress tests' for national power, and while they primarily display the capabilities of those directly involved, they provide indirect insights into the international system due to the deep interdependencies and interlinkages of the modern, globalised world (Lissner 2021). While the future shape of the international system remains unclear, all states are parsing and analysing the mountains of information produced by the war to better adjust their strategies according to new realities. The future direction of the international system has also become an increasingly prominent subject of research among students and observers of international relations, as scholars have scrambled to analyse how the war will impact the already crumbling post–Cold War international order (see e.g. Brunk & Hakimi 2022; Dück & Stahl 2025; Tellis 2024).

This work is well underway in China too, as the Chinese leadership observes the changes brought on by the war, and adapts its grand strategy of 'rejuvenation' based on perceived changes in the 'international structure' (国际格局, *guoji geju*). This article aims to shed light on this process by analysing discussions and debates of Chinese International Relations scholars on the effects of the war for the international system. There has been extensive scholarly analysis on how China views the war in Ukraine and on how the conflict could be affecting China's foreign policy (Chestnut Greitens 2022; Leonard & Bachulska 2023; Lin & Hart 2024; Medeiros 2022). Many scholars have also explored possible 'lessons' China is drawing from the conflict, both at the level of international politics (e.g. how unified and resilient is the West with its sanctions) and at the level of military strategy (e.g. how does the war impact the People's Liberation Army's planning on Taiwan contingency) (Feigenbaum & Szubin 2023; Fravel 2023; Wuthnow 2022).

This article hopes to contribute to this line of research by analysing Chinese IR scholars' perceptions of the major trends created and accelerated by the war, and the impacts of these trends on the evolution of the 'international structure' – that is, on the positions, strengths and weaknesses of major powers. Although such debates do not directly represent official views, Chinese IR scholars and China's policymakers exist in a complicated and mutually constitutive relationship, in which scholars can have a certain influence on the thinking of the leadership, while the leaders' policy choices construct boundaries for Chinese IR scholars as to what to think and write (Feng & He 2020a). In contrast to the ambiguous official foreign policy concepts or the propagandistic tone of China's state-affiliated press, Chinese scholarly debates, furthermore, provide calm and objective analyses of current events, offering an interesting window into how the current state of international relations is seen in China, and how it *might* be perceived within the foreign policy leadership as well.

The article aims to identify the main trends that the scholars believe are gaining traction in the wake of the war (increasing 'campification' of great power politics, accelerating de-globalisation of the global economic system and the rise of the 'Global South'), and analyses how these trends are estimated to impact the major powers: The United States, Europe, Russia and the developing world. In the concluding section, the article discusses how the scholars see China's place within the emerging international structure affected by these trends, and what (if any) policy advice they suggest for the Chinese leadership for adjusting its strategic approach. Overall, the debates reflect lingering doubts about the inevitable rise of China at the expense of the West's decline (see Doshi 2021), while preparing China for a volatile and dangerous world of great power competition.

Before moving into the actual analysis, the article briefly discusses the role of strategic information in international relations and in China in particular, and provides considerations on methodology and research data.

The Russo-Ukrainian war of revelation

The role of information is an interesting yet somewhat unexplored variable in the study of International Relations. As Rebecca Lissner has suggested in *Wars of Revelation*, to be able to effectively balance and adjust their strategies, states need reliable information on the landscape of international relations, especially on the relative strengths and weaknesses of great powers and their supporting coalitions. This includes information on the capabilities of one's main opponents, as well as those of one's allies and partners (Lissner 2021).

For Lissner (2021), information is nothing less than the 'currency' of international relations, as having a clear understanding of the structure of the international system is crucial for successful grand strategy.[1] However, making accurate estimates of the prevailing international landscape is extremely hard. National power is complex to measure, and great power relations involve considerable amounts of concealment and deception, making estimates prone to psychological miscalculations (Heuer 1999; Jervis 2017). Assessing even the level of one's own military capabilities is challenging as well, especially after long lasting 'fogs of peace' (see Howard & Wilson 1974), when military technologies and operational concepts have made significant developmental leaps without being used in actual combat. Other attributes of power, such as the political, societal or economic resilience of a state, are similarly hard to measure before put to an actual stress-test. Unlike in other domains of human activity, such as business, where the 'capabilities' of companies are continuously tested in the market, the true national power of states is rarely put to a serious stress test (Lissner 2021).

1 Jennifer Sims has argued in a similar manner that under conditions of anarchy, the side that has better analysis of the prevailing conditions is able to maintain 'decision advantage' over its opponents, leading to more efficient statecraft. See (Sims 2022).

For assessments of state power, war provides the ultimate test, producing bursts of information on their strategic capabilities. In addition to providing an objective assessment of the quantity and type of military power a state is able to generate on the battlefield, war also exposes the level of economic and societal resilience of the states involved in the conflict, and ultimately, serves as the final test for alliances and coalitions (Lissner 2021). Taken together, wars – especially major ones – compel all states to update their grand and military strategies based on the information flowing from the battlefield; this may result in minor adjustments in some cases and complete overhauls of strategic orientations in others. The ongoing war in Ukraine is providing large volumes of information on the capabilities of not only the primary contenders, Russia and Ukraine, but also of the strengths and weaknesses of broader coalitions and partnerships. In the largest scale, it even provides indirect insights into the interdependencies and interlinkages (e.g. the extent of value and production chains) of the broader, globalised economic system. The war is therefore prompting all states and coalitions to at least adjust their strategic outlooks based on their interpretations on the future evolution of the international system.

China is also in the process of estimating the emerging shape of the international system and making necessary adjustments in its grand and military strategies. In Chinese discourse – both official and academic – the structure of the international system is often denoted by concepts such as 'global security structure' (全球安全格局, *quanqiu anquan geju*), 'international structure' or 'global geopolitical structure' (全球地缘政治格局, *quanqiu diyuan zhengzhi geju*), all of which somewhat interchangeably point to the distribution of power within the system, but also include the strategic relations between major powers.[2] Instead of a static snapshot of the structure, the concept emphasises temporal change within a longer time frame, and according to Zhou Fangyin of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, aims to 'grasp the evolutionary trend rather than simply discuss the nature of the current structure' (Zhou 2020).

The international structure is seen as evolving through major historical trends, which provide both opportunities and challenges, and in which China must adapt its foreign and domestic policies. In the Chinese foreign policy decision-making system, officially sanctioned assessments of the prevailing trends serve a crucially important function (Heath, Grossman & Clark 2021). The Chinese Communist Party even bases its legitimacy on such claims that, due to rigorous and scientific Marxist-Leninist analysis, the party leadership is able to identify and anticipate, in the words of Xi Jinping, the evolution of the underlying 'historical laws' (历史规则, *lishi guize*) and 'world tides' (世界潮流, *shijie chaoliu*) (Xi 20213), and to adapt its grand strategy to reach its desired end-state of 'national rejuvenation' (Heath 2014).

2 Sometimes the word 'situation' (形势, *xingshi*) is used in place of 'structure'.

The actual process of trend analysis and policy planning is almost completely shrouded in secrecy as it takes place in opaque black boxes of high-level party committees. However, a rough public official assessment of the international structure and its main trends is available in authoritative speeches and publications, in which state leaders discuss China's foreign policy and its main principles. Throughout most of the reform era, official estimates of the future direction of the international structure tended to be generally optimistic. 'Peace and development' and 'multipolarisation' were identified as the main 'irreversible' trends, while an outbreak of a major war between great powers was considered very unlikely. The main challenge for these trends to reach their full potential has consistently been identified in 'hegemony and power politics' – a euphemism for the United States and its arguably 'unilateral' policies to maintain its leading position (Doshi 2021).

Positive evaluation prevailed through most of Xi Jinping's first two terms in power (2012–2022) as well. China, in the leadership's view, continued to remain in a period of 'strategic opportunity', and estimated that the 'relative international forces were becoming more balanced' as the US-led West was perceived to decline in contrast to China's rise. These developments were codified in the official terminology as 'changes unseen in hundred years' – a concept gaining considerable visibility since 2017, essentially meaning that the US decline was accelerating to the point that China could begin challenging its dominance more directly instead of 'hiding its strength' (Doshi 2021; Gill 2022).

However, following the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Chinese estimates of the evolution of the international structure have become more uncertain. In the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party organised in October 2022, Xi warned that while the trend of peace and development prevailed, the global community was facing numerous previously unseen challenges. 'Strategic opportunity' now 'coexisted with great risks', and unpredictable 'black swan' and 'grey rhino' events made it hard to predict future developments with any clarity (Xi 2022). Xi's remarks could be taken as signs of a more pessimistic official assessment on the future evolution of the international structure. The debates analysed in this article provide additional evidence that this might indeed be the case.

Regarding the method and data

Since official Chinese estimates on the shape of the international structure remain vague this article aims to go around them by analysing discussions in Chinese IR communities. Such scholarly debates have long been used as an important window for gaining insights on the prevailing sentiments in Chinese policy communities. Huiyun Feng and Kai He suggest that expert debates serve as a '"proxy measure" for the views of the Chinese policy community and government' (Feng & He 2020a), and although direct causal links between scholarly debates and official

policy cannot be proved, the debates can still at the least 'make sense of the policy boundaries and future directions of China's foreign policy' (Feng & He 2020b).

With this in mind, the article conducts a literary review of Chinese discussions on the shape of the international structure during the first two years of the still ongoing war in Ukraine. It explores major themes and converging narratives on the main trends that the Chinese scholars perceive as developing, and on how these trends are estimated to impact relations between major powers. As its source material the article uses primarily academic articles in Chinese peer reviewed journals, and to a lesser extent shorter commentary and opinion pieces and interviews published in magazines and blogs between 2022 and 2024. Much of the material has been gathered through the Chinese CNKI portal by using keywords such as 'Russia-Ukraine conflict', 'Ukraine' and 'international structure'. In addition to CNKI, many articles have been reached through websites such as *Aisixiang.com*, which re-publish journal articles and opinion pieces. Besides Chinese databases, numerous international websites translate and re-publish Chinese academic texts for the general audience. A very useful resource for conducting this review has been *The Interpret* (produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies), which publishes Chinese academic texts with both translations and original Chinese versions. In choosing the research material for closer analysis, the article has attempted to focus on most impactful journals (e.g. *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, *Eluosi Yanjiu*) and on scholars from well-known and prestigious universities and research institutions (e.g. CICIR or CASS). In total, 32 articles were chosen for closer analysis in this study. Importantly, all of the material was collected before the 2024 US presidential election, and the analysed views thus represent initial Chinese estimates of the war and its implications. In many cases, they also reflect Chinese analysts' reactions to President Joe Biden's foreign policy.

The limitations of the approach are obvious. Most prominently, the Chinese discursive space is vast, and an article-length study can only grasp a small part of its totality. Although this article suggests that certain generalisations on Chinese scholars' views can be made, the issues discussed in the subchapters could easily deserve studies of their own. Also, the selection of subjects for closer analysis (great powers) is somewhat arbitrary, as one could have also focused on, for example, the role and perceived future evolution of international institutions, such as the United Nations or BRICS.

Finally, there are concerns related to China's increasingly tense political climate, which limits space for open academic debate. The term 'debate' could indeed an overstatement, since most scholars analysed in this article seem to agree on basic interpretations, and the research material rapidly 'saturates' with similar definitions of the perceived trends, or of the strengths and weaknesses of the major powers. In addition to the similarity of the arguments, Chinese discussions tend to reproduce official framings (and as a consequence, those prevalent in Russia),

for example, in unanimously blaming NATO and its expansion as the sole cause of the war in Ukraine. While such similarity and saturation provide delight for its analyst, it raises questions as to whether the scholars are representing their genuine thoughts and beliefs, or if the concurrence is merely an aspect of the current intellectual climate of Xi Jinping's China. On the other hand, if the latter is the case, the debates could indeed be seen as strong 'proxy measures' of the official views.

Epochal change: Campification, de-globalisation and the Global South

The war in Ukraine is generally viewed as an important turning point by scholars and observers of international relations (Dück & Stahl 2025; Ikenberry 2024). Chinese scholars, in a similar manner, see the war – or rather the 'Russia-Ukraine conflict' since terms such as war or invasion are rarely used – as the most important geopolitical event in recent history. It is seen as marking an epochal change from the 'post–Cold War' era to an 'age of great power competition' (大国竞逐时代, *daguo jingzhu shidai*) or an 'era of great contention' (大争之世, *da zheng zhi shi*), with an overall effect of increased unpredictability, and an increase and escalation of conflicts from the Southern Caucasus to the Korean Peninsula (Renmin University Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies 2024; Wang 2023b).

Although unpredictability increases, Chinese scholars generally agree on three main trends intensified by the war: 'campification' (阵营化, *zhenyinghua*), de-globalisation and the rise of the Global South. In the Chinese analysis, these largely intermingled and overlapping trends are not perceived as being caused by the war, but they were fermenting long before its outbreak under the rubric of the 'greatest changes unseen in hundred years'. The war in the Chinese scholar's view is thus a powerful catalyst, or in the words of known Russia researcher Feng Shaolei, an 'oscillator', which accelerates the 'greatest changes' and the trends associated with them (Feng 2024a).

The first main trend, campification, means the emergence, consolidation and enlargement of strategic 'camps', which includes both military alliances and looser coalitions centred around ideological, economic or technological issues. Campification was already intensifying before the war, and the Chinese scholars see it as the original cause for the conflict itself. In the eyes of Chinese observers, the United States and the broader West were never interested in integrating Russia into a stable post–Cold War European security order, but instead, pushed for the expansion of NATO towards Russia's former treaty allies (Fu 2023; Huan & Ji 2022). In addition, the West waged ideological warfare against Russia by promoting 'colour revolutions' in its 'sphere of influence'. According to Liang Qiang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Russia has thus been practicing its own defensive 'containment' against Western incursions into its 'buffer zone' ever since the end of the Cold War, and as NATO had again brought forth Ukraine's

membership in the alliance in 2021, Russia saw no option but to launch its 'special military operation' (Liang 2024).

Whereas the 'new Cold War' or 'Cold War 2.0' is becoming a dominant frame for interpreting the ongoing great power competition in European or American IR communities (see e.g. Buzan 2024; Schindler et al. 2024), Chinese scholarly analysis does not perceive a 'new Cold War' on the horizon, even amid potential intensification of campification following the war. The most formidable and recognisable camp, in Chinese view, is the US led 'West', often called 'Amero-West' (美西方, *Meixifang*) to emphasise the dominating role of the US. The campification of the West has gained significant momentum from the war in Ukraine, as NATO has awakened from its 'brain dead' state, and as the European Union is militarising and aligning with the US in an ideological contestation against autocracies. A more worrying development for China is that the Amero-Western camp is expanding its reach towards the Asia-Pacific, as security cooperation with Pacific states is proceeding quickly under the pretext and momentum generated by the war (Wang 2023b).

The Amero-West has an acute conflict with Russia, but while Russia increases security cooperation with China and countries like North Korea and Iran, Chinese analysts do not perceive the emergence of an authoritarian camp to balance the West. Thus, although a 'new Cold War' according to some Chinese scholars may be brewing within Europe, the West and Russia do not represent the equally matched camps of the original Cold War. If anything, the new iron curtain is merely isolating the considerably weaker Russia from the rest of Europe (Fu 2023).

A new Cold War is not seen as a correct metaphor for the global situation either, since China is presented in the analyses as an independent actor, not belonging to any camp, nor allied with Russia or even strongly supporting Russia in its war against Ukraine. China is not placed in an 'authoritarian' block, and the Chinese experts are highly critical of the tendency in Western analyses (see e.g. Kendall-Taylor & Fontaine 2024) to lump China and Russia together into an 'authoritarian' axis (Yan 2023). In addition, Chinese scholars perceive much of the developing world (or 'the Global South') as positioned outside of major blocks as well, although some authors do see the recent expansion of SCO and BRICS through the lens of campification (Wang 2023c).

The trend of campification is closely connected to the trend of 'de-globalisation'. Even if Chinese analysts do not see the international structure as being divided into Cold War–style military-ideological camps, they do anticipate that the war will intensify the emergence of two (or more) economic and technological groups, as countries 'decouple' and 'de-risk' from economic interlinkages, and as sanctions and counter-sanctions 'weaponise' ever larger parts of the global economy (Renmin University Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies 2024). Many analysts use the concept of 'hemispherisation' (半球化, *banqiuhua*) to describe the

phenomenon in which value chains and flows of energy are concentrating into their own hemispheres. In energy, Russian exports are turning towards the east, while Europe pivots to the United States, mutually giving birth to new 'hemispherised' Atlantic and Asian energy economies (Liu, Huang & Hu 2023). Similar hemispherisation is evolving in various technologies, too. In the words of Wang Peng of Renmin University, an 'iron curtain of technology' is falling across the globe, with two technological trees intertwining value and supply chains around them and competing in the 'intermediate zones' (Wang 2023c).

However, a complete divergence between even the economic hemispheres is typically not predicted (Feng 2022) and most scholars argue that the trend of globalisation is continuing in the vast world outside the West-Russia proxy conflict due to the rise in power of the developing world. This is connected to the third trend caused by the war, the emergence of the Global South (often also called the 'new non-aligned movement') as a major power, as most developing states strive to maintain their independence, remain outside of the West–Russia-divide and focus on the development of their domestic economies (Fu 2023). Although the Global South is not described as one of the campifying blocks, Chinese scholars tend to see it as consolidating around its own ideological principles of neutrality and the prioritisation of economic development.

To summarise the three main trends, parts of the world are campifying and deglobalising at an increasing pace, while a rising Global South remains neutral and carries forward the trend of 'peace and development'. Great powers are adapting into this new reality with varying strengths and weaknesses and differing strategies, and the article will next examine Chinese scholars' perceptions of the main contenders and their future outlooks.

The United States: The winner of the war in Ukraine

When describing the United States and its strategy in the post-Ukraine world, Chinese scholars consistently begin from assumptions of the US's 'hegemonic' objectives. Echoing the official tone of the Chinese government, they perceive the United States as a self-interested actor, whose core objective is to maintain its hegemonic order through all means at its disposal, and to contain its main adversaries at both ends of the Eurasian continent. In this regard, the prolongation of the war in Ukraine is benefiting the US in numerous ways, and the Chinese analysis overall perceives the United States as emerging more powerful than ever from the war. First of all, a prolonged conflict in Ukraine wears down Russia's strategic capabilities in a slow but effective manner, as the Russian economy suffers and as Russian military capabilities are destroyed in large numbers. In addition, the war greatly benefits the US arms industry, as the Pentagon and US allies all over the world scramble to replenish their arsenals, often with US-made capabilities (Wang et al. 2022).

Furthermore, Chinese scholars do not perceive the United States as merely aiding Ukraine, but as a party to the conflict that is successfully waging 'proxy' or 'hybrid warfare' against Russia through a combination of military, economic, information and cyber means (Xu & Gao 2023). Chinese scholars have been surprised with how rapidly the US has been able to 'NATO-ise' Ukrainian armed forces with its military aid, and how effectively the NATO-ised Ukrainian force has fought against the Russians (Zhao 2023). In addition to direct military aid, the scholars mention intelligence sharing and cyber operations as tools of the US's hybrid warfare (Xu & Gao 2023), and many analysts have noted its ability to leverage private companies (e.g. Microsoft and Google) in organising Ukrainian cyber defences (An & Hao 2022; Hu 2023). The United States' hybrid warfare also includes 'economic warfare' waged through massive sanctions (especially in energy, see Shi & Zhou 2022), 'diplomatic warfare' and attempts to isolate Russia from the international arena, and finally, intensive information or 'cognitive' operations. In the terminology of one commentator, the US-led West is waging 'algorithmic cognitive warfare' (算法认知战, *suanfarenzhizhan*), which combines information offensives and content manipulations on social media with coordinated statements in the more open fora of global diplomacy (Zhong & Fang 2022). Overall, the war has provided a great display of the United States' capability to utilise various levers of its national power for waging hybrid warfare against Russia.

Beyond the frontlines of the proxy war, Chinese scholars emphasise the control the United States has exerted over its allies, especially in Europe, but increasingly in the Asia-Pacific as well. First of all, the war has driven European states into an economically precarious position, increasing their dependency on the United States, especially for energy supply. More importantly, the transatlantic security relationship has gained increased traction, as the war has awakened NATO from its 'brain dead' state. In the Chinese analysis, NATO is not an autonomous entity that designs its strategy through democratic deliberation, but a tool for the United States for projecting power and for maintaining its hegemony over Europe. Thus, NATO's recent consolidation around its core mission of collective defence in addition to its 'northern expansion' (北扩, *beikuo*, the inclusion of Finland and Sweden) are perceived as representing the pinnacle of campification, greatly reinforcing US power and influence in Europe (Wang 2023b).[3]

More worryingly, Chinese scholars have taken note on how the United States is utilising the momentum created by the war and the cooperation between China and Russia, to expand and consolidate its alliances in the Asia-Pacific. Perhaps the most direct linkage is NATO's expansion towards the Asia-Pacific region, or in Chinese terms, its 'Asia-Pacificisation' (亚太化, *Yataihua*). In its 2022 summit in Madrid, NATO designated China as a 'systemic challenge', and has since in-

3 On official views on 'northern expansion' see e.g. Renmin Wang 2023.

creased its cooperation with the so-called Asia-Pacific 4 (AP4) states: Australia, Japan, New-Zealand and South-Korea (Sun 2022). Chinese observers have since paid close attention to the increase of military exercises (especially in cyber and space) between NATO, Japan and South-Korea. Although they do not see NATO as being able to establish a strong presence in Asia in the near future, its Asia-Pacificisation represents a long-term trend as the alliance is an excellent tool for the United States to connect the European and Pacific theatres into a shared strategic space, in which material, technologies and sensitive information can flow both ways (Chen 2023; Puranen 2024; Sun 2022).

All this combined, the war in Ukraine has driven Russia into a strategic quagmire while greatly increasing US control over its allies, as well as its ability to project influence in other parts of the world. Chinese analysts thus generally describe the United States as the 'only winner of the war', and as likely to remain in a strong position, as long as the war drags on (Wang et al. 2022). However, Chinese analysts still see the United States as having its weaknesses, and many uncertainties abound, including its political stability and its ability to maintain domestic support for its war efforts in the long term.

Europe: Militarised, ideologised, yet weakened

Of all the regions beyond the immediate warzone, Chinese scholars estimate Europe as facing the most significant changes. Having long been accustomed to trends of peace, growing interdependence and globalisation, Europe is now quickly adjusting itself for militarised great power competition (Wang et al. 2022). With this, the 'European power structure' is in transformation, and Chinese analysts generally recognise three main trends driving it forward: deepening transatlanticism, ideologisation and militarism (Zhang 2024).

The first trend, transatlanticism, refers to the quick and strong turn of the European economic and security policies towards the United States. Before Russia's invasion, and especially during the first term of Donald Trump (2017–2021), many Chinese observers saw Europe as distancing itself from the United States. This was epitomised by French President Emmanuel Macron's suggestions that NATO was 'brain dead' and that Europe should develop 'strategic autonomy' in relation to other powers. The war in Ukraine has all but stopped that trend, and Europe is again turning towards the United States in its security and economic woes (Ibid.; Sun 2022; Zhang 2022). For Fu Yu, a professor of International Security at the Nankai University, the change is not due to the old 'Europeanist' powers, France and Germany, having abandoned their project of strategic autonomy, but a result of changes in intra-European distribution of power. Following Russia's invasion, both Germany and France have weakened economically and politically, and the power vacuum created by their decline is being filled by the rise in influence of Eastern European and Nordic countries, especially Poland (Fu 2023). For

Zhang Jian of CICIR, this block is driving for a more hawkish and offensive policy against Russia, and since it cannot rely on either Germany or France to defend their interests, it opposes ideas on European strategic autonomy and pushes for deeper security cooperation with the United States (Zhang 2024).

By ideologisation, the second intra-European trend, Chinese scholars refer to the unification of Europe in a self-perceived new Cold War against an authoritarian axis led by China and Russia. While the trend is not new, the war has greatly intensified its significance, since Russia's invasion (and China's neutrality) has helped Europe to lump Russia and China together into an imagined camp of authoritarian states. As a result, Europe is severing its economic and political ties with Russia and increasingly 'de-risking' from China as well. Furthermore, ideologisation is pushing European states to expand their presence in the Asia-Pacific region, both at bilateral and EU-wide levels, and through NATO (Yan 2023). Finally, the war has sparked a new momentum for the EU's expansion, as the Union is considering Moldova and Ukraine as its new members (Wang 2023b).

Finally, the third major trend changing Europe in the Chinese scholar's view, is the trend of militarisation. In a striking contrast to its past, when Europe wanted to present itself through 'cultural power' and 'institutional supremacy', the continent is now increasing its military budgets at an unseen rate, with Germany's 'Zeitenwende' investments as a prominent example (Ibid.; Zhang 2022). For some analysts, such budgetary increases are not seen as contributing to European strategic autonomy, however, as Europeans are mainly investing in US built capabilities (such as the German purchase of F-35 fighters). Instead of strengthening Europe's own defence industrial base, they are contributing to the US military industry, thus at least temporarily bolstering US dominance through military-technological interdependencies (Zhang 2022).

Overall, Chinese scholars see Europe as being amidst the biggest changes since the end of the Cold War, yet although its ideological unification and rise in military power could be read as signs of strength, Chinese analysts overwhelmingly estimate the power and influence of Europe as weakening in the emerging post-Ukraine international structure. 'De-Russification' and disengagement from Russian energy is considerably undermining European economic power, and some observers estimate that the continent is facing a new wave of 'de-industrialisation'. Militarisation is a slow process as well, and thus its overall weakness leaves Europe highly dependent on the United States at least in the short term, casting visions of an autonomous and self-reliant European great power in a dubious light, and forcing Europe to play the role of a junior-partner in the 'Amero-Western' camp (Zhang 2022).

Russia: Resilient decline

In describing Russia's strategic objectives before and after the war in Ukraine, Chinese scholars describe Russia as a defensive actor, aiming to prevent NATO's

incursions into a 'buffer zone' of neutral countries surrounding it. Beyond its immediate periphery, Russia is seen as striving to regain its great power status (of which controlling Ukraine is seen as a crucial part) and to build a multipolar world order to balance the power and influence of the United States (Liang 2024). The war has, however, displayed Russia's innate weaknesses, and the general estimation of the Chinese scholars is that while Russia has been able to continue the war, withstand Western sanctions and evade attempts at complete diplomatic stigmatisation, its overall power and influence have been greatly hurt as a consequence. While the Chinese interpretation of the roots of the conflict thus closely echoes Russian rhetoric, Chinese analysts are more in line with international estimates, which see the war as negatively impacting Russia's great power status (e.g. Šćepanović 2024).

First of all, Russia's military has proven to be much weaker than expected: technologically backward, operationally clumsy and incapable of conducting modern joint operations. In the Chinese categorisation of forms of warfare, the Russian military represents a barely 'informatised', mostly 'mechanised' force, which resorts to tactics reminiscent of previous world wars (Zhao 2023) and is increasingly vulnerable to Ukrainian long-range strikes (Ye 2023). Its logistical capabilities (including strategic air delivery) are weak, and its military production has been insufficient for a modern war (Huan & Ji 2022). Russia is not faring well in the domains of cognitive and cyber warfare either in the view of Chinese scholars. In the information domain, Russia quickly lost the initiative to gain 'public opinion dominance' (舆论控制权, *yulun kongzhiquan*) to the Amero-West, while its famed cyber capabilities have been offset by Ukrainian cyber defences supported by Western private companies (Zhong & Fang 2022).

Beyond the frontlines, Chinese scholars harbour doubts about the resilience of the Russian political and social order. Many scholars saw the Wagner mutiny of 2023 as denoting serious social tensions bubbling under the seeming façade of stability (Pang & Gao 2023). Among the most pessimist evaluations, Feng Yujun of Peking University saw Russia in a state of economic decline and political apathy, hinting in a not-so-subtle-manner that large-scale military failures have tended to bring forth revolutionary changes in Russian history (Feng 2024b). In an article published by *The Economist* Feng was more straightforward, stating that Russia was certain to lose the war in the long term (Feng 2024c).

Nevertheless, most Chinese analysis maintains that Russia remains a great power as it has been able to adapt into the realities of war, both at the operational level of the battlefield as well at the grand strategic levels of economy and diplomacy. Although scholars estimate the Russian economy as paying a heavy price for the war, it has nevertheless survived the West's massive sanctions, and been able to find substitute markets for its energy exports (Han 2023). Some accounts even see the war as hastening the systemic restructuring of the Russian economy

(Xu 2024). And although tensions abound, Russia is seen as socially stable enough to endure a long conflict (Wang 2023b). Finally, attempts to isolate Russia diplomatically have not succeeded as Russia maintains minimal relations even with the West, and well-working relations with the developing world. Taken together, the Chinese analysis sees Russia as weakened and facing considerable challenges, but resilient enough to continue the war for many years to come.

The Global South: An emerging global power

The third major trend recognised by the Chinese scholars is the rise of the developing world, often called 'the Global South' in the debates – a trend acknowledged by non-Chinese analysts as well (Alden 2023). As with other trends, the war in Ukraine is seen as not causing, but catalysing the already prevalent rise of the Global South, as most of the developing world is heavily influenced by the war and its ramifications (e.g. by disruptions in food and energy supply), but at the same time attempting to distance from its campifying and de-globalising effects (Wang 2023a). As a combined effect, the identity of the Global South as a collective of non-aligned states unified by a unique set of principles has greatly strengthened, and Chinese scholars see it as an emerging global power, centred on its main objective of economic and social development, neutrality and non-interference (Fu 2023; Xu & Shen 2023).

Chinese scholars anticipate the Global South evolving into a prominent balancing force between the established powers, positioning it as a zone of intensified competition among them. They especially emphasise the attempts of the Amero-West to lure the Global South into its contestation between democracies and autocracies, while China is never presented as competing for influence within the group (Cai 2023; Xu & Shen 2023). Chinese scholars, however, unanimously define China as a core member of the Global South through organisations such as the BRICS, and through Chinese initiatives such as the BRI and the global security initiative (全球安全倡议, *quanqiu anquan changyi*) (Xu & Shen 2023).

However, many authors note, that the cohesion of the group is fragile with numerous diverging and even contradicting interests providing avenues for exploitation by the Amero-West (Xu & Shen 2023). The role of India is, in a similar manner, somewhat an elephant in the room, since its role as a part of the group is emphasised, but the growing tensions between China and India are brushed aside. Overall, the rise of the Global South is seen as an irreversible trend, but its ascendancy as a collective and game-changing player in the emerging international structure is not wholly certain.

Conclusions: China amid epochal changes

The War in Ukraine has provided a 'revelatory' test of the capabilities, strengths and weaknesses of great powers and their alliances (Lissner 2021). To sum up the

Chinese scholarly interpretation of this test, the war is seen as a crucial historical turning point that hastens the trends of 'camp confrontation', de-globalisation and the rise of the Global South, and that escalates ongoing conflicts all around the world. The war is seen as challenging the trend of 'peace and development', as well as the expectation of a swift decline of the West that paves the way for China's rejuvenation. Instead, China is facing a challenging, unstable and rapidly evolving international structure, in which its 'period of strategic opportunity' is turning into an era of intensified great power competition.

Overall, the debates represent a highly hierarchical and 'realistic' worldview, in which international politics is essentially seen as a contest between great powers that leaves smaller states (including Ukraine) as mere pawns without real agency in shaping their destinies. When comparing the major powers, Chinese observers perceive the United States as 'winning', as it wears down Russian capabilities with its 'hybrid warfare' and gains tighter control over its allies especially in a weakening Europe, but in the Asia-Pacific as well. Like Europe, Russia's global influence is seen as waning, but Chinese scholars hold mixed views on its future prospects. Finally, the 'Global South' is finding its own identity amid the intensifying campification, possibly emerging as a balancing power of its own.

Amid these evolving dynamics, China's role is perceived as that of an independent and neutral mediator, with the Global South as its immediate peer group. China is not perceived as belonging to an 'authoritarian axis' with countries like Russia and Iran, and even though many authors provide a rationale for China's support of Russia in its war, the relationship is described as being similar to China's relations with other developing countries, or as driven by *realpolitik* interest-calculus that provides economic benefits and prevents the deterioration of security in China's 'strategic rear' (战略后方, *zhanlüe houfang*) (Zhao 2022).

In providing policy advice for the Chinese government, most authors remain vague, merely voicing their support for official foreign policy slogans such as 'the three initiatives', and the 'Community of Shared Future for Mankind'. However, most would agree that China must do its utmost to prevent, or at least hinder, further campification by continuing its delicate balancing act between the Amero-West and Russia, while strengthening its influence and leadership within the Global South (Yan 2023; Zhao 2022). Practical challenges of such balancing are well understood, however, as Chinese scholars are well aware, it is hurting especially China's relations with the European Union. In practice, China should thus, for example, maintain an impression of distance between itself and Russia (e.g. by emphasising that a 'strategic partnership' is not an alliance, and that China does not support Russia's war) while continuing to cooperate with it in the domains of economy, security and global diplomacy like before. Even those critical of Russia's war, such as Yan Xuetong, generally agree that China must remain on its side, while not directly supporting its war effort or taking actual sides in the conflict

(Yan 2022). Zhao Huasheng from Tsinghua provides perhaps the most realistic analysis: In the event China's ties with the United States collapse, or the Taiwan conflict escalates, it is absolutely crucial that Russia remains at least non-aligned, simply for reasons of energy supply, as Zhao foresees China potentially facing strong Western sanctions or even attempts at embargo (Zhao 2022).

Finally, although campification and competition are intensifying, the Global South is seen as a zone in which peace and globalisation continue to march forward. China must therefore strengthen its influence in this region by supporting its non-alignment and distancing from the 'new Cold War' narrative of global competition between democracies and autocracies promoted by the Amero-West.

In many parts, the essence of the Chinese analysis of the future shape of the international system mirrors non-Chinese analysts' views, in which the great power competition between increasingly consolidated geopolitical groupings is becoming the dominant global trend (Ikenberry 2024). Although this undercurrent is likely continuing during the second term of President Donald Trump, many other parts of the Chinese analysis may require an update following Trump's erratic foreign policy initiatives and outright U-turns. Instead of 'waging hybrid war' against Russia through arms sales, economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure, the United States is now seeking a rapid peace settlement of the conflict, and even flirts with a cooperative relationship with Russia. In Europe, the US seems to be voluntarily giving up the leverage it has gained over European states, which could ease Chinese worries of an increasingly campified 'Amero-Western' alliance that is expanding towards the Asia-Pacific. And although the US's China strategy will likely continue along previous lines, Trump's willingness to defend Taiwan could be disputed and even a 'grand bargain' with China cannot be ruled out.

Intuitively, many of the changes brought by Trump could end up being beneficial for China's strategic objectives, and could especially weaken the effects of campification. The analysis provided in this article is therefore already in need of a 'part two', focusing on Chinese scholarly debates in the post-Biden era.

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