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Editors

Dr. Hanna Shelest
Dr. Mykola Kapitonenko

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Contacts:

website: <http://ukraine-analytica.org/>
e-mail: Ukraine_analytica@ukr.net
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ukraineanalytica>
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CHINA'S PEACE PLAN AS PART OF BEIJING'S "MULTIPOLAR WORLD ORDER" AGENDA

Daryna Hoch

Renmin University of China

This article argues that China's Peace Plan is a diplomatic manoeuvre to bolster its standing amongst so-called Global South states, rather than a document proposing a long-standing and just peace. The paper, therefore, examines the broader implications of the Peace Plan within the context of Beijing's shift towards a more assertive international stance, contrasting perceptions of the status quo between China and the West, and the PRC's adoption of a multipolarity narrative, a rise in domestic nationalism, and a new model of major power relations. The article also addresses the challenges faced by Ukrainian diplomacy in engaging with China, emphasising the need for strategic planning to fine-tune the complexities of Sino-Ukrainian relations.

"China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis", also called "China's Peace Plan", is a prominent example of Beijing's growing ambition to remodel the contemporary international framework to its preference. Introduced a year after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the document reflects a set of views on building towards the "peaceful end of the conflict", rather than a sturdy solution for a long-lasting peace¹. Nevertheless, it serves as a vivid example of the increased involvement of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in world affairs, and signals an eagerness to take on a global system-level role.

The main argument of this article is that the PRC's Peace Plan is a diplomatic manoeuvre, designed to bolster its global leadership, primarily amongst the so-called Global South states. Therefore, the author will first

delineate the core concepts of China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping's rule, then explore the Peace Plan from the strategic, domestic, and systemic perspectives. Last, the paper will propose policy recommendations to the Ukrainian government, by analysing current issues and ways to address them.

Main Principles and Pillars of the Chinese Approach to Global Governance

To interpret China's current foreign policy, two crucial points must be considered: foreign policy changes under Xi Jinping, and the status quo perception.

First, after Xi Jinping assumed office in 2013, the previous strategy of "keeping a low profile" was substituted by a more vigorous approach to reclaiming the

1 关于政治解决乌克兰危机的中国立场 (China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 24.02.2023, <https://bit.ly/4dNL0it>

Chinese leadership position. As Bates Gill argues, the underlying objective for any foreign policy actions of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) is to guarantee the legitimacy of its rule². Therefore, unlike what most theoretical perspectives suggest, Chinese foreign policy's main focus is on demonstrating the CCP's ability to protect people's interests, ensuring that the domestic population remains satisfied with the party in power.



PRC's Peace Plan is a diplomatic manoeuvre, designed to bolster its global leadership, primarily amongst the so-called Global South states

Second, Chinese and Western perspectives on the 'status quo' contrast significantly, leaving room for vehement discussion and misinterpretations, not only on the level of scholars but even that of politicians. Both the West and the PRC recognise China as a 'rising state', which, according to the realist school of thought, inherently aspires to rebuild the world order in line with its preferences. 'Revisionist state' is another term, used to describe the PRC, with a negative connotation. It was coined in the West to describe states which challenge the modern 'status quo,' led by the US and its allies³. From the Chinese point of view, however, it is precisely the developed countries that coerce international actors to adopt "the

rules-based order", whether they are willing or not⁴. For Beijing, aggressive Western behaviour is the main reason behind global conflicts and wars in a polarised world.

To further understand the new foreign policy reality under Xi Jinping's rule, it is vital to analyse the Chinese global governance paradigm, which pivots on three main pillars: multipolarity, nationalism, and a new model of 'major power' relations.

Multipolarity. Frequently cited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) concepts, such as 中国梦 (China Dream) and 中华民族伟大复兴 (the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation), this became a reflection of the change of foreign policy focus under Xi Jinping, in the hope of assuring China's 'rightful place' in the world.

In 2017, another important concept of 构建人类命运共同体 (Building a community with a shared future for mankind) was introduced into the Constitution of the CCP, and a year later, into the Constitution of the PRC, to symbolise China's reluctance to prosper through hegemony and domination over other nations⁵. This foreign policy paradigm is useful for comprehension of the Chinese outlook on the current world order, as it best reflects China's striving to build a multipolar system.

The concept of a 'Multipolar world', from the perspective of Chinese policymakers, can ensure China's economic growth and stability. In his special speech on the World Economic

2 B. Gill, *Daring to Struggle: China's Global Ambitions under Xi Jinping*, Oxford University Press: New York 2022, pp. 32-35.

3 J. G. Ikenberry, Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of American Postwar Order, *International Security* 23, no. 3, 1999: pp. 43-78.

4 A. P. Liff and J. G. Ikenberry, Racing toward Tragedy?: China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma, *International Security* 39, no. 2, October 2014: pp. 52-91.

5 凝聚团结共识 促进人类进步——中国共产党推动构建人类命运共同体的时代意义 (*Building solidarity and consensus to promote human progress: The contemporary significance of the Communist Party of China's efforts to build a community with a shared future for mankind*), Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China Website, 4.07.2023, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202307/content_6889840.htm

Forum's Davos Agenda in 2021, Xi Jinping proclaimed: "The essence of multilateralism is that international affairs are handled by everyone through consultation, and the future and destiny of the world are jointly controlled by all countries."⁶ According to this Chinese perspective, a multipolar world is about openness and inclusiveness, adherence to international law, consultation, and cooperation, instead of conflict and confrontation.

For the sake of achieving the 'multipolar' ambition, under Xi Jinping's leadership, China started to implement projects across the globe, and lead the institutional development of those international organisations which are viewed as an alternative to the Western-led institutions. The BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) fill up the vacuum for decision-making amongst the states rejected by the West, or those that have decided to reshape the global world order on their own terms.



Chinese nationalism is most evident in opposition to the US and Japan and, practically, regarding Beijing's territorial claims

The Chinese 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) provides space for Chinese investment in foreign states' infrastructure projects, and, allegedly, even produces some political influence over the participating countries. The infrastructure projects implemented with Beijing's assistance serve as fertile ground for further bilateral cooperation.

Moreover, while the Western states still struggle to devise their alternative to the BRI, China continues to renew contracts, and even finds ways to engage states in new projects.

In this context "a community with a shared future for mankind" and 'multilateralism' serve as a *façade* for China's political agenda. By promising all partner states "a place at the big table", the PRC policymakers intend not to precisely 'invite all', but to serve as a 'Global South representative'⁷. Such an approach is both a gateway to obtaining an upper hand in world politics, and a tool to legitimise the leading role of China, supported by smaller states.

Nationalism. Another buzzword, which describes modern Chinese politics is 'nationalism'. There are two reasons for the growing nationalist movement in mainland China. First, there is a political necessity for a rising patriotic sentiment, as a response to the threat of foreign imperialism, which takes the form of territorial claims and foreign states' accusations levelled at China's policies. Second, nationalism has been especially pronounced in the advent of one-party rule, which required a rational reason behind the diminished credibility of its official ideology. State-led nationalism, which called for an unconditional identification with the country, therefore, was revived under Xi Jinping, as grounds for diplomatic action.


Nowadays, Chinese nationalism is most evident in opposition to the US and Japan and, practically, regarding Beijing's territorial claims. As for the former, the liberal tradition of the US and historical animosity towards Japan appear important factors in the CCP's

6 习近平在世界经济论坛“达沃斯议程”对话会上的特别致辞 (*Xi Jinping's Special Speech at the World Economic Forum's "Davos Agenda" Dialogue*), China Communist Party News Network, 25.01.2021, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0125/c64094-32011490.html>

7 Y. He, *China's Historical Choice in Global Governance*, China Renmin University Press, Beijing: 2015, pp. 122, 145-146.

leadership. This prompts Beijing to adopt reactive policies, and take opposing stances on the most pressing global issues⁸.

On the other hand, nationalism is reflected in China's unwavering territorial claims. The Taiwan issue, and claims pertaining to the South China Sea, and East China Sea, Arunachal Pradesh or South Tibet exemplify a new impetus of nationalism-driven foreign policy. Recent developments, which have signalled Beijing's reluctance to settle the disputes with a consensus, question the multipolarity principle of peaceful coexistence. Nationalism is an important foreign policy tool, which ensures domestic support behind the CCP's leadership, and its protective stance on the international stage.



This distinct approach towards 'big countries' suggests Beijing's underestimation of middle and smaller states as sovereign actors, which imperils dialogue on equal terms

Nevertheless, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has given the PRC a vague idea of which counter-measures in the struggle for one's geopolitical endeavours are the most urgent, inviting further foreign policy considerations regarding nationalist sentiment. The Peace Plan reflects the government's belief that China must become a major peace broker. The state media tries to persuade the people that the Peace Plan represents the PRC as a mighty and influential global actor.

Major Power relationships. The third way used by the PRC to increase influence in global politics is a new model of major power relations⁹.

There are four fundamental principles in this: eliminating conflict, avoiding confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation¹⁰. By adopting such a vision, China has asserted itself as an influential global actor. However, if this had been accepted by the White House, the concept would have imperilled US relations with other states, downgrading the relations with 'non-major powers'. Reaching consensus on the opposite sides of the Pacific has become a challenge, and left the Chinese initiative unanswered so far.

This distinct approach towards 'big countries' suggests Beijing's underestimation of middle and smaller states as sovereign actors, which imperils dialogue on equal terms. The auxiliary role assigned by default to these countries allows scarcely any possibility of accounting for their strategic interests. Besides, such perception makes PRC policymakers assume that behind Ukrainian resistance to Russian aggression, there are Western powers, which desire to sustain the conflict by maintaining the supply of weapons and continuing hostilities.

The 'Peace Plan' as an Extension of a Global Leadership-Seeking Agenda

Beijing's attempts to persuade other states that its behaviour differs in essence from the 'hegemonic' and 'collective' policy of the West is effective to a certain degree. To achieve the leading position amongst the countries of the Global South, more initiative-taking

8 S. Zhao, We are Patriots First and Democrats Second, [in:] E. Friedman and B.L. McCormick (ed.) *What if China doesn't Democratize? Implications for War and Peace* M.E. Sharpe: Armonk - New York 2000, pp. 21-48.

9 习近平谈治国理政: 第一卷 (*Xi Jinping on the Country Governance, Volume 1*), Foreign Languages Press: Beijing 2018, pp. 279-281.

10 关于构建中美新型大国关系问题 (*On the establishment of a new type of major-country relationship between China and the United States*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 20.03.2016, <https://bit.ly/3AVVpdo>

and vigour are needed, and in recent years, Beijing has accumulated enough resources to take on the 'bridging' role, as first seen in the efforts at mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The perception that the Chinese government leverages its peacekeeping to enhance its strategic position in the Global South underpins its rationale in China's Peace Plan for the Russian-Ukrainian War.



Beijing's attempts to persuade other states that its behaviour differs in essence from the 'hegemonic' and 'collective' policy of the West is effective to a certain degree

Having established the main principles of Beijing's approach to global governance, the article will next analyse China's Peace Plan on three levels: strategic, domestic, and systemic, explaining how the PRC leverages the Plan to meet its objectives within each of these dimensions.

Strategic level. From a strategic perspective, the Peace Plan lacks binding arrangements and clear provisions for a comprehensive and lasting peace. In essence, China's Peace Plan is merely a set of statements, such as "the abandonment of the Cold War mentality" and "ceasefire and cessation of war", combined with humanitarian requirements for civilian safety and protection¹¹. The document's neutrality is evident, allowing for plenty of interpretations by the involved parties, which prompts more uncertainty and inconsistency. The key problem is a lack of specific measures. Even in the

"China-Brazil Joint Statement on Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis," the only ceasefire-related specific measure found is holding a "peace conference that is recognized by both Russia and Ukraine", which goes against Ukrainian and Western stances on resolving the war¹².

Analysis on the strategic level implies that China's aim is not to end the War, but rather to highlight Beijing's efforts in peace-making, while engaging with Global South countries. Moreover, the lack of certainty indicates China's reluctance to appear as clearly favouring either side. Such reluctance is a prominent feature of developed states' position of non-interference in European affairs, which are seen as outside their immediate zone of interest.

Domestic level. From the domestic standpoint, as mentioned above, China's 'multipolar world order' strategy, embodied in the Peace Plan, serves two objectives: to achieve leadership among global powers, and to remind the Chinese people of the PRC's significant role in global geopolitics.

A pivotal role in world affairs is crucial for the Chinese leadership politically. By utilising its 'peace diplomacy', the CCP leadership presents China as a responsible major power, ready to engage in dialogue and consultations, but with a firm stance on issues concerning territorial integrity, which resonates with the domestic audience.

In addition, Chinese influence in the peace-making process, combined with an openly expressed opposition to the 'hegemonic' West and its involvement in the Russian-Ukrainian War, serves as a reminder to the Chinese people of the CCP's ability to pose

11 关于政治解决乌克兰危机的中国立场 (*China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 24.02.2023, <https://bit.ly/4dNL0it>

12 "Brazil and China present joint proposal for peace negotiations with the participation of Russia and Ukraine", Official Website of President of Brazil, 23.05.2024, <https://bit.ly/4cZ1WkT>

as the sole protector of security and justice. This reinforces the Party's claims about its legitimacy and unique power projection ability on behalf of the whole nation, which, according to the CCP leadership, would be unattainable in a multiparty parliamentary system.



By utilising its 'peace diplomacy', the CCP leadership presents China as a responsible major power, ready to engage in dialogue and consultations, but with a firm stance on issues concerning territorial integrity

Systemic level. From the systemic perspective, China's 'neutrality' can be seen as the desire to challenge the current world order with Western values at its core. The 'impartial' stance is a form of tacit support for Russia. This is evidenced by the lack of a direct condemnation of the Russian military invasion, Beijing's restrained stance in the UN, abstention from sanctions, refusal to attend the Global Peace Summit, and allegedly, though this has been denied, arms and technology supply.

The rationale behind the lack of a call to action is the quest for leadership in the developing world, which requires posing as self-identifying with these states. First, there are countries in the Global South which perceive Western involvement in the War as a part of the colonial agenda. Russia, for these states such as North Korea, Iran, or Venezuela, is seen as 'resisting Western pressure', and not viewed as a hegemonic power trying to occupy a sovereign neighbour. For other countries, such as Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar, Russia is a prominent economic and military partner. There are also plenty of Global South states which are primarily concerned with food

security and supply chain stability, rather than the sovereignty of Ukraine or a just peace. Middle powers such as Indonesia, Brazil, and Mexico, seek peace for regional stability and their own interests, rather than just in terms of international order. The third and the smallest group of Global South states, which fully support Ukraine, such as Chile, Argentina, and Ghana, are also engaged in this, as they can refer to China's Peace Plan as a viable starting point for discussions.

So, China's Peace Plan, notable for its broad interpretability, encompasses these three positions of the Global South states and does not contradict any of their stances. Additionally, it gives Global South states an opportunity to engage in peace brokering without explicitly choosing sides. An exemplary case is the Brazil-PRC proposal for peace negotiations, which closely aligns with the Peace Plan, allowing Brazil to emerge as a pivotal player, while positioning China as a key influencer in shaping Brazil's approach to peace initiatives. Therefore, China's position accommodates the aspirations of the Global South states to be perceived and accepted as significant players.

Dealing with the Rising Power

When cooperating with China on peace arrangements, Ukrainian diplomacy faces the daunting task of securing its strategic interests, while seeking Beijing's alignment. Nevertheless, the Peace Plan is a consequence, rather than a coincidence, preceded by diverse issues in Ukrainian diplomatic practice in Asian states. Therefore, instead of focusing on how to tackle the Peace Plan at the current stage, it is of vital importance to first consider what caused a distinct Chinese position.

As the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba noted, we do not have a hundred per cent accurate insight into the Chinese position, nor do we fully understand

the PRC¹³. This is caused by two main reasons: a lack of qualified analysts, and MFA's bias towards the European region.

Concerning the former, it is precisely the MFA that bears the responsibility for implementing international relations with other states; however, in democratic states, think tanks, and analytical centres also play a significant role in critically examining and influencing foreign policies. The problem arises at the basic level. Ukrainian universities and programmes that aim to foster international relations lack specialisations in less common Asian languages, with the majority of the students focusing on European languages. Those who choose to study Chinese often lack exposure to the language environment and practical experience. On the other hand, while purely linguistic majors offer a variety of Asian language options, graduates often lack training in foreign policy studies. This leads to the next challenge: the scarcity of students majoring in international relations who participate in exchanges in Asian countries, where they can get accustomed to the local environment and culture, conduct people-to-people diplomacy, and represent Ukraine, returning with first-hand knowledge. Lack of programmes for students to volunteer in the embassies and consulates abroad is another obstacle that prevents young specialists from immersing themselves in the diplomatic culture, and learning the craft early on. Therefore, think tanks lack qualified specialists with insight in local politics and language skills, which will become the backbone of future foreign policymaking.

Focus on European countries is justifiable, considering Western states' prominent role in aiding Ukraine to resist Russian aggression. However, the shortage of precise

strategies targeting Asian countries is as evident as ever now. The "Asian Strategy of MFA" released in 2020 remains unpublished, so it is difficult to assess its effectiveness. Releasing this document will facilitate the discussion amongst foreign policy professionals, sinologists, and Asia experts, enabling the MFA to adjust their policies more precisely. Holding high-level round tables, and conferences, and inviting those with expertise in China-related issues is a good way of brainstorming to adjust the current approach. It is crucial to understand the Chinese perspective and allow for a broader dialogue with scholars and politicians from the PRC itself.




When cooperating with China on peace arrangements, Ukrainian diplomacy faces the daunting task of securing its strategic interests, while seeking Beijing's alignment

Beijing's reluctance to participate in the Global Peace Summit symbolises its refusal to follow the global agenda, seen as Western-led, which contradicts Chinese thought on multipolarity. Therefore, Chinese opposition to the 'Western-style world order' is reflected in its lack of condemnation of the Russian invasion. Besides, China gets benefits from an extended war. The task of reversing this line of thinking is unfeasible through Ukrainian MFA's efforts only in a short-term perspective; it requires profound changes in China's perspective towards the West and Ukraine. Stronger research into China, better people-to-people diplomacy, and more high-level contacts are the measures that the MFA can implement.

13 «Мирна» позиція Китаю зумовлена очікуванням, хто переможе у війні – Кулеба (China's «peaceful» position is conditioned by the expectation of who will win the war – Kuleba), Ukrinform, 3.06.2024, <https://bit.ly/47jP0F2>

However, convincing China that Ukraine is acting independently and that the War is not a 'Western scheme' to maintain global dominance is nearly impossible for Ukraine, given its limited international influence.



Beijing's reluctance to participate in the Global Peace Summit symbolises its refusal to follow the global agenda, seen as Western-led, which contradicts Chinese thought on multipolarity

Three widely discussed high-politics solutions for termination of the war are: adopting a firmer stance, organising a high-level dialogue between President Zelenskyy and President Xi, and attempting to influence China's public image. The first choice, a firmer stance, might spark a controversial reaction, leading to Beijing's 'equal opposite reaction', thus provoking increased support for Russia. The second option, initiating a high-level dialogue, appears promising, since decision-making in China is primarily driven by the head of state. However, this option is unlikely to succeed, as President Zelenskyy is not viewed by the PRC government as a decision-maker, but rather as a secondary player influenced by the West. The third option of influencing the global image of China needs first-hand research, good strategic planning, and a resolute decision to openly oppose the PRC. This approach, however, may negatively impact Sino-Ukrainian relations, as it involves open or covert criticism of China. It is undeniable, though, that as long as Chinese

foreign policy's main goal is to convince the Chinese population of the PRC's pivotal role as the only option for a prosperous future, there exists the possibility of reversing current support efforts, if the population perceives aligning with Russia as detrimental to their interests.

After all, the Peace Plan and its principles, however vague, do not directly contradict the Ukrainian proposals for a just peace. Therefore, it is possible to integrate Chinese notions, such as 'saving face' for the Chinese domestic populace, while proposing more decisive measures.

Recent Chinese public outrage, caused by the ruthless words of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) major general, Xu Hui, who asked "What are the Ukrainians fighting for?", signals the readiness of the local people to hear about and discuss the Russia-Ukraine War from various perspectives¹⁴. As public opinion in China is largely controlled by the state, the efficacy of the Ukrainian efforts is largely limited. The way to solve this issue is yet another challenge requiring deep interest, thorough analysis, and strategic planning.

Daryna Hoch, holding a Master's degree in *International Relations*, is a postgraduate student at Renmin University in China. Currently, she is the chief editor of an online platform, focused on Chinese politics and international relations. Proficient in Chinese and five additional languages, Daryna's areas of interest include middle powers, China's foreign policy, and security in the Asia-Pacific.

14 中国少将奉劝乌方想想“为何而战”？(Chinese Major General advises Ukraine to think about “why they are fighting?”), Weibo, July 2024, weibo.com.d

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