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- ASIAN GEOPOLITICS
- RUSSIAN INVASION
- UKRAINIAN FACTOR

ASIA

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THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR AS A TURNING POINT FOR UKRAINE'S RELATIONS WITH CHINA

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The Russian-Ukrainian war may become a turning point in Ukrainian-Chinese relations, which have developed intensively for 30 years. China considered Ukraine as a supplier of high-quality agricultural products; a source of military technology for the People's Liberation Army; an important element in infrastructure projects within the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. At the same time, China's position regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war, despite Beijing's declaration of neutrality, is pro-Russian in many respects. In addition, Ukraine's desire to join the EU and NATO, intensification of the US's strategic competition and Russia's partnership with China will obviously significantly weaken Kyiv's relations with Beijing. This article focuses on the dynamics of the Ukrainian-Chinese partnership before the full-scale war, Beijing's position regarding the Russian invasion, and the further prospects of Ukraine's relations with China.

Overview of Ukrainian-Chinese Relations

Ukrainian-Chinese relations before the full-scale war with Russia were viewed by the Ukrainian authorities exclusively positively. Bilateral documents signed in 2011 and 2013 between the two countries declared a strategic level of partnership¹, while the level of trade has been constantly growing. In recent years, China has become one of Ukraine's key partners (and since 2019, the largest trading partner). In addition to trade, China was seen as a potential source of investment, urgently needed by the Ukrainian economy. Ideas about the

construction of Chinese enterprises and industrial parks in Ukraine, the improvement and development of infrastructure, possible joint projects in the fields of mechanical engineering and aircraft construction, etc. were widespread in the Ukrainian political, expert, and media environments².

China's launch of the global initiative "One Belt, One Road" (to which Ukraine joined in 2017), which announced the goal of building logistics corridors, high-quality infrastructure, and enterprises on the territory of the participating countries, was aimed at providing an additional impetus to investment cooperation, and bringing it to a

1 *Political relations between Ukraine and China*, MFA of Ukraine, Embassy of Ukraine in China, [<https://china.mfa.gov.ua/spivrobotnictvo/185-politichni-vidnosini-mizh-ukrajinoju-ta-kitajem>]

2 S. Kamyshev, *Nam nuzhno po-novomu posmotret na Kitaj*, „Gazeta Den”, #39, 2007 [<https://day.kyiv.ua/ru/article/den-planety/sergey-kamyshev-nam-nuzhno-po-novomu-posmotret-na-kitaj>]

strategic level, creating a belt of prosperity and security. In addition, the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, signed in 2014, geographical proximity to the European Union, and its high-quality labour force were considered by the Ukrainian side as advantages that would facilitate the arrival of Chinese manufacturers to Ukraine.

Another prospective direction was military-technical cooperation, which provided Ukrainian defence companies with an opportunity to export to the promising and capacious Chinese market. Significant Chinese orders for Ukrainian defence companies, in turn, made it possible for Ukraine not to lose the scientific and industrial potential that remained in Ukraine after the USSR. Since 2008, military-technical cooperation with China has been considered by some military analysts as an opportunity not only to sell, but also to purchase weapons that the Ukrainian Armed Forces needed: primarily missiles, air defence and anti-missile defence³. This became relevant after the Bucharest NATO summit, at which Ukraine was denied a Membership Action Plan; and the issuing of territorial claims on Ukraine by Russia. The purchase of arms in China would have meant ensuring the military security of Ukraine under conditions of the inefficiency of international mechanisms for regional security, the sharp deterioration of Ukraine's defence capabilities, and complications in the military and political environment⁴.

At the same time, most of Ukraine's hopes did not come to fruition. China did not become either a driver of economic growth⁵ or a source for ensuring Ukraine's military

security. Beijing continued to buy raw materials with little added value, while more than 90% of China's exports were high-tech products. Chinese exports to Ukraine exceeded Ukrainian exports to China by several times: the trade was unbalanced. Chinese investments accounted for a small share. According to the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, direct investment in the Ukrainian economy from China in 2015-2019 was only USD 127 million, bringing China's share over this period to only 0.07% of all foreign investment in the country⁶. In addition, the investments were not aimed at the reindustrialisation of Ukraine, but were focused on improving China's access to Ukrainian raw materials and agricultural products. Last but not least, a significant part of the financing from China was expensive loans accompanied by risks of corruption and inefficiency.



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It was impossible for Ukraine to benefit from cooperation in matters of defence: China continued to buy weapons and technologies that its defence industry needed, but avoided selling weapons to Ukraine. In addition, it was not possible to create joint defence enterprises with China either on

3 V. Badrak, S. Zhurets, D. Bogdanov, V. Kopchak, O. Nabochenko, A. Yarovoj, *Ukraine – China*, „Project-to-Project Cooperation to Strategic Partnership”, 2009 [<https://www.slideshare.net/cacds/uk-china-en231109>]

4 Ibid.

5 *O «novom okne vozmozhnostej»*, „Gazeta Den”, #39, 2020 [<https://day.kyiv.ua/ru/article/den-planety/o-novom-okne-vozmozhnostey>]

6 State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2021 [<http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua/>]

the territory of China or in Ukraine. Beijing, having received the necessary technology or a sample of weapons (including through the intelligence activities of the Chinese special services in Ukraine), quickly mastered the technology and independently organised production (including unlicensed copying) on its territory, subsequently refusing to buy Ukrainian products, and launching competition with Ukraine in the world arms market. The real threat was China's attempts in 2016 to take over the Ukrainian company "Motor-Sich" outside the official channels of military-technical cooperation. Had it succeeded, Ukraine would have suffered colossal industrial and technological losses, lost opportunities to develop aviation, unmanned and missile programs, and significantly worsened its relations with its NATO partners⁷.



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However, for the Ukrainian authorities, such prospects did not seem threatening or problematic. Ukraine earned money from exports to the Chinese market, continued to hope for the arrival of Chinese investments and called their relations with China 'strategic'. In the new Foreign Policy Strategy of Ukraine issued in 2021, China was named as a strategic partner, with prospects for the development of trade

and implementation of joint projects in the fields of infrastructure, energy, transport, and industrial production⁸. It can be concluded that the negative experience of the cooperation of other countries with China, the strengthening of global strategic competition between the United States and China, the constant threats to Ukraine from Russia, and new challenges for Ukraine from China have not been seen as factors for reviewing and adjusting Ukraine's approaches to cooperation with a "strategic partner".

China's Position on the Russian-Ukrainian War

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has fully demonstrated the failure of the Ukrainian-Chinese so-called "strategic partnership". China has adopted a position that is often called "pro-Russian neutrality" or "tacit consent". In Russian expert circles it is called "Russia-friendly neutrality." On the one hand, China declares its support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, but on the other hand, it never criticises Moscow for invasion and war crimes, placing the blame on the US and NATO, which allegedly provoked the conflict with their irresponsible actions. In addition, China consistently votes against the UN resolutions on Ukraine; intensively develops political, economic, military and military-technical relations with Russia; criticises sanctions imposed on it, saying that they harm the world economy; opposes the West's arms supplies to Ukraine, saying that they do not resolve the conflict, but only add fuel to the fire; spreads disinformation, for example, about the activities of the so-called 20 American biolaboratories in Ukraine (in which biological weapons are supposedly

7 Y. Poita, *Why Ukraine is Reassessing its Defense Cooperation with China*, 2021 [https://chinaobservers.eu/why-ukraine-is-reassessing-its-defense-cooperation-with-china/]

8 *Strategy of Foreign Policy Activity of Ukraine*, 2021 [https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/4482021-40017]

being developed)⁹ and even about the revival of Nazism in Ukraine¹⁰. In addition, China provides full diplomatic support to Russia, claiming that its “legitimate security concerns” should be respected. From the Chinese perspective, Ukraine should not join NATO, but should be a “bridge between the West and the East”¹¹, a position which actually denies the possibility for Ukraine to make a choice and turns it into a buffer, a grey zone between the West and Russia, with Moscow’s predominant influence.



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The efforts of Ukrainian diplomacy to change China’s position turned out to be futile. China not only held its position, but also continued to spread pro-Russian narratives in national and international media. The heavy bombing and partial destruction of Ukrainian cities, and Russia’s war crimes did not change China’s position. In the Chinese political, media and expert discourse, there are no mentions of Ukraine’s right to self-defence and independence, or the genocide against the Ukrainian people. Instead, Ukraine is

depicted in the Chinese media as in Russia’s zone of influence, and temporarily under the control of the West.

All of that makes it impossible to ensure the voice of Ukraine will be heard in China (contents about Ukraine in the Chinese media is carefully censored; the description of events in Ukraine is carried out through the lens of the Russian media; interviews with Ukrainian officials, experts, representatives of society – with the exception of a single interview with the minister of foreign affairs Dmytro Kuleba, – are not published). In the sixth month of the war, the South China Morning Post published an interview with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy¹², including his request to the leader Xi Jinping to hold direct negotiations and try to influence Russia. But that only demonstrates the failure of the strategic partnership, since diplomatic channels in fact do not work, and the president of Ukraine has to address the Chinese leader through the media. Any official response from China about their readiness for negotiations has been vague. During the daily press conferences, the speaker of the Chinese MFA, Hua Chunying, has avoided a direct answer to the journalists’ questions, noting: “China maintains close communications with Ukraine and other parties in the Ukraine crisis”¹³.

This significantly changed the perception of China in the Ukrainian expert and media community, and in society as a whole. It is also the reason for the revision of relations with China by the Ukrainian government.

9 *Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021*, EAST Center, 2021 [https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/DRI-report-2021.pdf]

10 Y. Jerry, *Analysis: How Ukraine has been Nazified in the Chinese information space?* 2022 [https://medium.com/doublethinklab/analysis-how-ukraine-has-been-nazified-in-chinese-information-space-81ce236f6a55]

11 *Ukraine should be bridge between East, West, not frontline for confrontation: Chinese envoy*, “Xinhua”, 2022 [https://english.news.cn/20220304/2dff24d71ce74c22b55c699e5d806cf3/c.html]

12 A. Chew, *Volodymyr Zelenskyy seeking ‘direct talks’ with China’s Xi Jinping to help end Russia’s invasion of Ukraine*, “South China Morning Post”, 04 August 2022 [https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3187580/volodymyr-zelenskyy-seeking-direct-talks-chinas-xi-jinping-help]

13 *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference*, 04 August 2022 [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202208/t20220805_10734891.html]

Prospects for the Development of Ukrainian-Chinese Relations

The “Pro-Russian neutrality” of China, the aggravation of strategic competition between China and the United States, the deepening of Beijing’s partnership with Moscow, and Ukraine’s European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations will all significantly affect Ukraine’s relations with China.

Ukraine, which is gradually integrating into the European economic and security institutions, will have to share EU and NATO approaches to China in one way or another. According to “EU-China – a Strategic Outlook”¹⁴ China is simultaneously a partner, a competitor, and a rival. In “NATO 2022 Strategic Concept”¹⁵, China is defined as a challenge to NATO’s interests, security, and values, listing the specific actions of China that pose a threat to the Alliance. Thus, Ukraine will have to give up its strategic partnership with China.

Ukraine will need to make a comprehensive assessment of the potential and real challenges related to China, significantly strengthen expertise on China, and increase the number of studies conducted together with their EU and NATO partners. That will contribute to a better understanding in the Ukrainian political, expert, scientific and media environment of China’s real regional and global goals, and the opportunities and challenges for Ukraine in relations with China, including regarding the hybrid methods of China’s influence on Ukraine. It will also contribute to the establishment of a broad discussion on these issues, the building of a stable consensus, which will

help to develop the optimal strategic long-term position of Ukraine towards China.

Ukraine is likely to significantly limit its relations with China, leaving room for cooperation exclusively in trade, while banning cooperation in a number of other sectors. For example, the ban may refer to the construction of 5G networks by the Chinese company Huawei, and the prevention of the access of Chinese companies to critical infrastructure in Ukraine¹⁶.



Ukraine will need to make a comprehensive assessment of the potential and real challenges related to China, significantly strengthen expertise on China, and increase the number of studies conducted together with their EU and NATO partners

Ukraine’s defence cooperation with China will probably be stopped. This is determined by the approaches of the EU and NATO, in which an embargo on arms supplies to China is being introduced; China’s attempts to acquire Ukrainian defence technologies; the need to organise the effective protection from China of sensitive technologies that will be transferred to Ukraine by the NATO partners. Termination of the defence cooperation with China will ensure the necessary level of trust between Ukraine and its EU and NATO partners. It will also prevent the threat to Ukraine’s allies from the PLA in the Asia-Pacific region, where Ukrainian technologies could have been employed.

14 *EU-China – a Strategic Outlook*, 2019 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf]

15 *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, 2022 [https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/]

16 Y. Poita, *Dangerous China: how to minimize risks for Ukraine in cooperation with a “strategic partner”*, 2021 [https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/experts/2021/12/6/7131099/]

Ukraine will probably stop cooperation with China within its investment initiatives, including “One Belt, One Road”, and will adopt a law on screening foreign investments regarding national security threats. China’s participation in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine will be either significantly limited or completely absent. This is due to both geopolitical and technical-legal reasons: the post-war recovery will be financed by European funds and based on EU principles, which will impose significant restrictions on the participation of Chinese companies.

Conclusions

Despite the fairly intense development of the Ukrainian-Chinese partnership, China has neither become a driver of economic growth in Ukraine, nor a guarantor of security. China’s economic projects in Ukraine, the importance of Ukraine as a supplier of agricultural products, and the long history of defence cooperation with Kyiv did not cause China to express clear diplomatic support for Ukraine. In contrast, China’s diplomatic, informational

and economic support to Russia, is acting contrary to international law and against the national interests of Ukraine.

The position of Beijing towards the Russian-Ukrainian war will probably lead to a significant revision by Kyiv of its approaches to China, which will develop in the sphere of trade, but will be significantly limited in the political sense, and in the investment, technological, and defence sectors.

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