

UKRAINE GEOPOLITICAL EUROPEAN FLASHPOINTS VIS-À-VIS INDIA AND CHINA: FROM AMBIVALENCE TO STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT

FRANCISCO JOSÉ LEANDRO

fleandro@um.edu.mo

Ph.D. in political science and international relations from the Catholic University of Portugal in 2010, and his habilitation from ISCTE–University Institute of Lisbon in 2022. From 2016 to 2017, he took part in a post-doctoral research programme on state monopolies in China – One belt, one road studies. In 2014, 2017 and 2020, he was awarded the Institute of European Studies in Macau (IEEM) Academic Research Grant, which is a major component of the Asia-Europe Comparative Studies Research Project. From 2014 to 2018, he was the Programme Coordinator at the Institute of Social and Legal Studies, Faculty of Humanities at the University of Saint Joseph in Macau. From 2018 to 2023 he was the Associate-Dean of the Institute for Research on Portuguese-Speaking Countries at the City University of Macau. He is currently Associate Professor with Habilitation in International Relations in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Macau (China). His most recent books are: *Steps of Greatness: The Belt and Road Initiative: An Old Archetype of a New Development Model* (2020), Palgrave Macmillan; *Geopolitics of Iran* (2021), Palgrave Macmillan; *The Handbook of Special Economic Zones* (2021), IGI Global; *Disentangled Visions on Higher Education: Preparing the Generation Next* (2023), Peter Lang Publishers; *The Palgrave Handbook of Globalization with Chinese Characteristics* (2023), Palgrave Macmillan; *Changing the Paradigm of Energy Geopolitics: Resources and Pathways in the Light of Global Climate Challenges* (2023), Peter Lang Publishers; and *Portuguese-speaking Small Island Developing States: The development Journeys of Cabo Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Timor-Leste* (2023), Palgrave Macmillan

ROOPINDER OBEROI

roberoi2019@gmail.com

Fellow at Institute of Eminence, Delhi School of Public Policy and Governance and a Professor at the Department of Political Science, KMC, University of Delhi (India). She received a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Delhi. In 2012, she was awarded a postdoctoral research fellowship by the University Grant Commission of India. In 2017 she was awarded the UKIERI project by the British Council. She has authored and edited several books: *Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development in Emerging Economies* (Lexington Publishers 2015), *Globalization Reappraised: A false Oracle or a talisman?* (Vajpeyi, D and Oberoi, R, Lexington Books, USA, 2017), *Revisiting Globalization: From Borderless to Gated Globe* (Springer, 2018), and *Social Enterprise in the Higher Education Sector*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2020), *Contestations in Global Civil Society* (Emerald Elgar, 2022). She has published around 35 articles in peer-reviewed journals and 26 chapters in international books. She is an editor of *Social Responsibility Journal*. She has also completed an international project on *Social Enterprise and Higher Education* awarded by the UK-India Education and Research Initiative (2017-2020). She has been a visiting research fellow at the University of Huddersfield UK since 2020. She is the founder of the Centre of Innovation and Social Enterprise (CISE), KMC, University of Delhi, and the Young Leader Policy Discourse Forum (YLDPF). She is also a coordinator and convenor of the 180DC KMC chapter. Her areas of specialization include political science, public policy, public administration, global governance, CSR, social enterprise, and higher education.



Abstract

Ukraine's Westward drift has been countered by Russia's invasion. This conflict marks a dramatic escalation of rivalry and a momentous crossroads for global security, symbolizing a clear alteration in the world's security milieu from a unipolarity to one demarcated by a revival of Cold War competitiveness and global reconfiguration of power balance. Some political analysts view it as a manifestation of the Kremlin's growing antipathy towards the U.S., NATO, and implicitly the EU's post-Cold War expansionism into the erstwhile USSR's sphere of influence.

Response from the global community toward the invasion of Ukraine has been mixed: there has been an array of condemnations that is pushing the international community to a New Cold War, (re)aligning the EU, NATO, and the U.S. on a number of key issues, but many have staked a tacit, condoning stance that prioritizes the protection of their own immediate interests. Meanwhile, ideological, nuclear and economic powers such as China and India have adopted strategic ambivalence towards the invasion. China, as a member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and as an alternative ideological power house, is also facing a sort of paradox with Chinese characteristics. India, as the world's sixth largest economy and an emerging power devoted to self-reliance, has seized the opportunity to capitalize on the Russia-India-China trilateral strategic cooperation. This is significant, as, together, China and India account for more than half of all FDI-inflow to low- and middle-income countries. However, as the war wears on, the appeal of any initial constructive neutrality begins to backfire. For China, it damages its branding of peaceful options, severs its economic partnerships with the EU, and reinforces the trade-war antagonist perceptions in relation to the U.S. in light of the looming isolation of Russia. The 2024 U.S. presidential elections will likely add more uncertainty.

Ultimately, this research illuminates how India and China's involvement may impact the EU's security. The research uses an inductive methodology and combines analyses of events, qualitative primary sources, key media references, the realism school of international relations, and it is organized as follows: (1) Introduction: The new Cold Power Play and Hot War; (2) Decoding India's Strategic Ambivalence; (3) EU and China: Diplomatic aloofness or constructive engagement? (4) China-Russia: Paradox with Chinese Characteristics; (5) Conclusion.

Keywords

European Union, US-China Competition, International Relations Theory, Strategic Autonomy, Balance of Power.

Resumo

A invasão militar Russa na Ucrânia, tem por objectivo combater a sua deriva para Oeste. Este conflito armado marca uma escalada dramática de rivalidade e, assinala uma encruzilhada importante para a segurança global, simbolizando uma clara alteração no ambiente unipolar no contexto de segurança mundial. Além deste facto, demarca também o renascimento da conflictualidade à guisa da Guerra Fria e ainda, uma reconfiguração global do equilíbrio de poderes. Alguns analistas políticos vêem estes factos como uma manifestação da crescente antipatia do Kremlin em relação aos EUA, à OTAN e, implicitamente, ao expansionismo pós-Guerra Fria da União Europeia (UE), na antiga esfera de influência da URSS.

A resposta da comunidade dos estados à invasão da Ucrânia foi mista: Por um lado, houve uma série de condenações que conduziram a um ambiente internacional para uma nova espécie de Guerra Fria, (re)alinhando a UE, a OTAN e os EUA em várias questões importantes. Por outro lado, outros estados têm assumido uma postura tácita de condescendência, que prioriza a proteção de seus próprios interesses imediatos. Enquanto isso, potências ideológicas, nucleares e económicas como China e Índia, adotaram uma ambivalência estratégica em relação aos acontecimentos na Ucrânia.

A China, como membro do Conselho de Segurança das Nações Unidas (CSNU) e como potência ideológica alternativa, enfrenta também uma espécie de paradoxo com características Chinesas. A Índia, como a sexta maior economia do mundo e uma potência emergente



dedicada à autossuficiência, aproveitou a oportunidade para capitalizar a cooperação estratégica trilateral Rússia-Índia-China. Estes factos são significativos, pois, juntos, a China e a Índia respondem a mais da metade de todo o fluxo de Investimento Directo Externo para países de baixo e médio rendimento. No entanto, à medida que a guerra avança, o apelo da neutralidade construtiva inicial, começa a ter também os seus efeitos negativos. A China, acaba por não beneficiar totalmente das suas legítimas opções pacíficas, prejudicando as suas parcerias económicas com a UE e reforçando as percepções antagonistas na guerra comercial em relação aos EUA, à luz do isolamento iminente da Rússia. Finalmente, as eleições presidenciais de 2024 nos EUA, provavelmente, adicionarão mais incerteza a este cenário. Em última análise, esta investigação clarifica como o envolvimento da Índia e da China pode produzir efeitos no contexto da segurança da UE. A investigação utiliza uma metodologia indutiva e combina análises de eventos, fontes primárias qualitativas, referências jornalísticas de momentos chave, considerando a escola do realista das relações internacionais. O texto está organizado da seguinte forma: (1) Introdução: O novo jogo da Guerra fria e a escalada da guerra; (2) Decodificando a ambivalência estratégica da Índia; (3) UE e China: distanciamento diplomático ou engajamento construtivo? (4) China-Rússia: Paradoxo com Características Chinesas; (5). Conclusão.

Palavras-chave

Guerra na Ucrânia, União Europeia, Índia, República Popular da China, Federação Russa, Ambivalência Estratégica, Neutralidade

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Introduction: The New Cold Power Play and Hot War

A New Cold War - reminiscent of the 1950s but with apparent, essential differences in international circumstances - has been unfolding (Karaganov, 2021). This New Cold War, between not only the Russian Federation (hereafter Russia) and NATO but also the U.S. and China, has been looming long before the ongoing Ukraine crisis. Such is the current reality of the international system where battles are being fought for spheres of influence. Ukraine has been more than a critical combat zone; it is where two opposing ideologies collide: one, classical, hard supremacy, driven by the simple, unrefined ideas of "blood and soil"; the other, a more contemporary approach for propagating national interests and influence through effective and malleable philosophical, communicative, and financial apparatuses frequently referred to as "values" (Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2022).

The world is said to have entered the New Cold War era, whose iron curtain is drawn wherever the reach of Russian troops ends (Gaston, 22 February 2022). Politically and economically, Russia is becoming increasingly isolated, "and Russian foreign relations will be increasingly zero-sum or even negative-sum" (Engle, 2014). Russian Federation is isolated by overwhelming defeating majorities (Table 2) at UNGA and uses the veto to block all the initiatives addressing the Ukraine War, at UNSC, as its last resort, as it did during the Cold War. The war in Ukraine is all about the European defence architecture and Russia's fears posed by the continued expansion of NATO and European values. The looming possibility of the Ukraine accession to European Union and NATO would represent the end of the "Russia buffer zone", consequently being perceived as having the 'enemy' literally at the gates. This narrative suggests that Putin had seized Crimea out of an enduring wish to resurrect the Soviet Empire (or at least to protect what is left from it), and has ultimately gone for the rest of Ukraine. The 2014 Maidan Revolution and the ousting of the Ukraine's constitutionally-voted pro-Russian president had been the last



straw for Putin. Therefore, his pushback to reclaim control was, arguably, expected.

The West had it coming: they had moved too close to Russia's backyard, menacing Georgia and Ukraine's push for NATO membership had in particular seriously perturbed the equilibrium in the region; Putin had constantly upheld that these two countries joining NATO would outright signify a direct security risk to Russia. From the Russian perspective, the existence of NATO is an unacceptable vestige of the Cold War (Talbot, 1995; Carpenter, 2022), inherently directed against them, particularly after the end of the Warsaw Pact. For the Russian Federation the key question is why the Western allies did not disband NATO? The reality is, however, very different: as Rajagopalan (2022) categorically explains, it was Russia's own post-Cold War decline that left it vulnerable to Europe, not the other way around. Indeed, Russia's self-perception as a waning power - especially in regard to its ideological and economic appeal - is the root cause of its insecurity, and its invasion of Georgia in 2008 - Putin's last resort - should have demonstrated his determination to curtail Russia's demise. Yet, despite this clear warning, NATO never publicly closed its doors to Georgia and Ukraine (and to Finland and Sweden).

Ukraine President Zelensky was banking on the U.S.-led NATO to come to its support in case of any conflict with Russia, but, truthfully, Russia's attack was not just about Ukraine; it was also part of a larger geo-strategic to stall NATO's eastward expansion. After the collapse of the USSR, from 1991 till 2007, NATO had enlarged into the Czech Republic (now Czechia), Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Putin, speaking at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, questioned whether such NATO expansion was the West's way to box in Russia.

The EU's eastward expansion and the West's backing of the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine starting with 2004's Orange Revolution were therefore playing with fire and have now escalated into full-blown war. Putin called the expanding EU a mere stalking horse for NATO expansion, and when Russian leaders looked at Western social engineering in Ukraine, they saw their nation as next on the list. This strategic trio of the West — NATO expansion, EU enlargement, and democracy promotion — would serve to not only symbolize Russia's failure to counteract, unmasking its true state of affairs beneath the façade of a modern powerhouse, but also add to Russia's anxiety. For Putin, it was now or never to act against Ukraine — as he blames the West for making trouble in Russia's backyard, threatening Russia's core strategic interests, even though the EU has never been by any means a military organization, and, as an association of states, has seemed to enjoy considerable appeal.

For Putin, the disintegration of the USSR was the biggest catastrophe of the 20th century (2022 was to be the centenary of the Soviet Union). Over the past few decades, Western regimes have tried to pacify Russia, presuming that if Russia seizes just one piece of land — in Moldova (Transnistria), Georgia, or Ukraine — then the incumbent administration can be placated, and the West can continue its economic, political, and cultural relations with Russia. This is where their calculus has erred and has been a cause for frustration for the Ukrainians: despite the growing isolation of Russia (such as from G7, G20, Arctic



Council, and WEF), the world has not taken decisive action to stop Russia, consequently rendering Ukraine a mere epicenter of global political tectonics.

Table 1 - Comparative Key Indicators								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	GDP	HDI	SDI	Major Trading Partners	Military Expenditure	Weapons Exports	Public Debt	Relations with U.S.
European Union	17,088,620.74 (3 rd Largest)	0.895 Average ¹ (2020) 28 out of 189	66.70 92 out of 168	European Commission (2021) Exports – US (€399M), UK (€283M), China (€223M), Switzerland (€156M), Russia (€89M). Imports – China (€472M), US (€232M), Russia (€162M), UK (€146M), Switzerland(€123M).	1,5% GDP	USD 5,722B2 (2020) 2 out of 32	94% GDP	Relative alignment and mutual reinforcing. Very important trade partners.
People's Republic of China	17,734,062.65 (2 nd Largest)	0.761 (2019) 85 out of 189	65.44 100 out of 168	Exports - United States (US\$438B), Hong Kong SAR (US \$262B), Japan (US \$151B), Germany (US \$112B), and South Korea (US \$110B). Imports - Japan (US \$133B), South Korea (US \$131B), United States (US \$122B), Germany (US \$106B), and Chinese Taipei (\$104B).	1,7% GDP (Unconfirmed official figure)	USD 760B (2020) 8 out of 32	70% GDP (Official figure ³)	Very important relationship in the global context. Economic competition and ideological antagonism.
Republic of India	3,173,397.59 (6 th Largest)	0.645 (2019) 131 out of 189	58.81 115 out of 168	Exports – UK (US\$49.7B), China (US\$18.5B), UAE (US\$18.1B), HK SAR (US\$9.18B), and Germany (US\$8.8B). Imports – China (US\$64.2B), United States (US\$26.6B), UAE (US\$22.1B), Saudi Arabia (US\$16.8B), and Iraq (US\$14.4B).	2,1% GDP	USD 151B (2020) 18 out of 32	84% GDP	Growing in importance. Currently strengthening across economic and political areas.
Russian Federation	1,775,799.92 (11 th Largest)	0.824 (2019) 52 out of 189	73.45 62 out of 168	Exports- China (US\$49.3B), UK (US\$25.3B), Netherlands (\$ 22.5B), Belarus (US \$15.8B), and Germany (US \$14.2B). Imports - China (US \$50.7B), Germany (US \$26.1B), Belarus (US \$12.8B), South Korea (US \$7.93B), and Italy (US \$7.71B).	4,3% GDP	USD 3,203B (2020) 2 out of 32	19% GDP	Critical bilateral relationship with implications well beyond the two states themselves.

¹ The highest value was in Ireland: 0.955 points and the lowest value was in Croatia: 0.783 points.
² Germany, Italy, Spain, The Netherlands and France.
³ This number has been challenged by different analysts, such as "Today, China's banking system is still standing despite a debt-to-GDP ratio of 264%" (Pei, 2022). Nevertheless, according to the World Bank International Debt Report (2022, p. 3), China is one of the world's largest single creditor nations.

Sources: (1) WB, 2021; (2); (3) SDI, 2021; (4) EC, 2022b) and OEC, 2022; (5) WB, and SIPRI 2020; (6) GE, 2022; (7) Trade Economics, 2022

Mearsheimer's remarkably clear and consistent work provides compelling answers as to why, tragically, aggressive state strategies are a rational answer to life in the international system (Toft, 2005): Post-USSR Russia had been humiliated by heavy-handed retribution from the victor of the Cold War (i.e., the West). This in turn paved the way for a strong, Soviet-style leader (i.e., Putin) to rise to power, under whom the Russians could unite. The trajectory of the assertion of power and influence in the international system that would ensue follows Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism. For Russia, it took advantage of China's increasing economic dominance and the demise of the U.S.'s global leadership to assume a position that challenged the U.S.'s military supremacy. All of these events culminate in the creation of a new international order (Mearsheimer, 2001). Where U.S. and European leaders had blundered was in attempting to turn Ukraine into their stronghold right on Russia's border; and, now that the consequences have been laid bare, it would be prudent to avoid blundering further down the same misbegotten course. One of the strong points of classical realism, in contrast to U.S. neorealism, is the mindfulness of how significant it is to comprehend the local and internal circumstances for a nation's successful defense against external coercions. Raymond Aron, Edward Carr, and Hans Morgenthau articulate their theories during critical periods in Europe's development (Tsygankov & Tsygankov 2022). That probably helps to understand the Russian unprovoked war of aggression.

Politically and economically, Russia will likely become more isolated, and its foreign relations more zero- or even negative-sum. There is now bipartisan consensus in Washington that China and Russia are the most existential threats to U.S. security



interest, while anti- Western/U.S. sentiments have been mounting in Moscow and Beijing. NATO's new strategic concept (2022) not only states that Russia "is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area" (NATO, 2022, Paragraph 8), more importantly, "[t]he deepening strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests" (NATO, 2022, Paragraph 13). Such has been the political tectonics underlying the Ukraine war, in which China has decisive momentum, since the EU and Moscow are not the leading actors, as they themselves are not self-subsistent.

The U.S. and its European allies thus face a trilemma on Ukraine: 1) continuing down the current road, which will prolong hostility with Russia and devastate Ukraine in the process - a scenario that pushes China further towards Russia; 2) working together to create a prosperous but neutral Ukraine, one that does not threaten Russia but allows the West to repair its relations with Moscow — this scenario will reward forceful land occupation by a UNSC member (as it does not penalizes Russia), which simply undermines the international system. This scenario is very unlikely to happen and China will continue to adopt neutrality with Chinese characteristics; 3) escalating their involvement in Ukraine, which will exacerbate hostility with Russia - a scenario with chaotic, unpredictable global consequences that drive China towards siding further with Russia. Ultimately, however, all scenarios tend to converge towards a grim outcome in the international order:

"A Russian victory [in Ukraine] ... would lead countries around the world to arm themselves with nuclear weapons, because they would know that, in the final analysis, they are alone. And lonely, fearful countries with nuclear weapons may very well use them [...] Ukrainian victory would encourage if not guarantee change in a Russia that has yet to accommodate itself to the loss of empire and still evidently aspires to its restoration". (Cohen, 2022)

This suggests that a protracted stalemate would be the best option. Moreover, from the West's perspective, China detaching itself from Russia will benefit its global leadership. China however strongly disagrees with this; China perceives that the results of the Ukraine war will produce consequences for the international order, and this time China wants to have a say in it. The Ukraine war may herald a new international order — a new bipolarity of actors including China, but not Russia.

1. Decoding India's Strategic Ambivalence

We turn to India: the soon-to-be world's most populous country, a nuclear power, an economic powerhouse, and a political actor with strong geopolitical implications on its relationships with Russia, China, the U.S., and the EU. In the context of a broader regional reality, India is wedged in geopolitical contestations: The regional and global looming rise of China, the Taliban's return in Afghanistan, the possible convergence of interest among



China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and the war in Ukraine. All these factors have put India in a perceived unpleasant spot. Russia, conceivably, is the state that is not ill-disposed.

After Russia's 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, on the next day, India vetoed a UNSC resolution to condemn Putin's aggression disguised as a "special operation." On 18 March, the UNGA overwhelmingly adopted A/RES/ES-11/1, demanding Russia to immediately end its military operations in Ukraine and unconditionally reverse its decision on the status of certain areas in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine. On 30 September 2022, a new draft resolution, circulated by the United States and Albania, was supported by ten of the fifteen members of the Council, with Russia voting against it. Four members abstained, Brazil, China, Gabon and again India (Table 2). This draft described the so-called referendums held by Russia in the four regions of Ukraine which Moscow now regards as sovereign territory – Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhya – as illegal and an attempt to modify Ukraine's internationally recognized borders. As Table 2 summarizes the UN resolutions, emphasizing India's position in relation to the Ukraine war.

Table 2 – Summary of the United Nations Decisions		
#	Content	Positions
UNSC S/2022/155 UNSCR draft 25 Feb 2022	2. Deplores in the strongest terms the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine in violation of Article 2, paragraph 4 of the United Nations Charter; 3. Decides that the Russian Federation shall immediately cease its use of force against Ukraine and shall refrain from any further unlawful threat or use of force against any UN member state;	The draft resolution was not adopted due to the negative vote of a permanent member of the Security Council (Russian Federation) (S/PV.8979). Eleven members voted in favor, one against and three members China, India and the United Arab Emirates abstained.
UNGA A/RES/ES-11/1 (18 March 2022)	3. Demands that the Russian Federation immediately cease its use of force against Ukraine and to refrain from any further unlawful threat or use of force against any Member State; 4. Also demands that the Russian Federation immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders;	Adopted by a recorded vote of 141 in favor to 5 against (Belarus, Eritrea, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, and Syria) with 35 abstentions. China and India abstained.
UNSC S/2022/720 UNSCR draft 30 Sep 2022	6. Also declares that the 21 February 2022 decision by the Russian Federation related to the status of certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine is a violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and inconsistent with the principles of the Charter; 7. Decides that the Russian Federation shall immediately and unconditionally reverse its decision on 21 February 2022 related to the purported status of certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, and refrain from future decisions related to the purported status of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhya regions of Ukraine;	The draft resolution was not adopted due to the negative vote of a permanent member of the Security Council (Russian Federation). Ten members voted in favor, one against and four members Brazil, China, India , and Gabon abstained.
UNGA GA/12458 (12 October 2022)	The General Assembly condemned the Russian Federation's attempted illegal annexation of the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine, and demanded it immediately withdraw all its military forces from Ukraine territory. India joined several other speakers in expressing deep worry that the people of the global South were feeling pain from a food, fuel and fertilizer shortage, and sky-high price increases, as a result of the war.	Adopted by a recorded vote of 143 in favor to 5 against (Belarus, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Nicaragua, Russian Federation, Syria) with 35 abstentions. China and India abstained.
	Statements (Selection) Fergal Tomas Mythen (Ireland) condemned the Russian Federation's attempts to illegally annex the Ukrainian regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, and its holding of illegal, illegitimate and sham referendums. Such actions are another blatant breach of the United Nations Charter and do not represent the freely expressed will of the people in those regions, he said (...) Describing the Russian Federation's veto as a "reprehensible attempt to excuse its own military aggression against Ukraine, a fellow member of our United Nations," he reiterated the call to abolish the veto. He then called on the Russian Federation to immediately cease hostilities, unconditionally withdraw from the entire territory of Ukraine and refrain from further threats of the use of force of any kind, including nuclear weapons. Agustín Santos Maraver (Spain), aligning himself with the European Union, condemned the sham referendums held in parts of Ukrainian territory temporarily under the Russian Federation's military control. The Russian Federation persists in its flagrant violations of international law, he said, adding that the international community will never recognize these illegal annexation attempts (...) Noting that the Russian Federation's veto paralysed the Council at a time when that country is threatening to use nuclear weapons, he said such actions undermine global peace. Ishikane Kimihiro (Japan) condemned the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine (...) The attempted illegal annexation of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions clearly breaches the Charter and international law, he said, adding that the General Assembly must not accept such outrageous actions. Further, such unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force shake the very foundation of the international order, he said, adding that while the Security Council has the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace, it failed to act because of the veto cast by the Russian Federation.	

Source: <https://digitalibrary.un.org/record/3965290>

India's abstentions might have been perceived as surprisingly, as its ambiguity ran counter to its old resolve on respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity. Western policymakers hoping for increased allyship with the world's largest democracy were left disappointed. The Bilateral relationship between Moscow and New Delhi dates back multiple decades: since India's independence in 1947, the two have shared a high level of mutual political and strategic trust, regularly supporting each other on various



contentious international relations issues, and there is the notion of Russia being a sturdy, dependable supporter of India that traces back to 1955 - both the erstwhile Soviet Union and, since the 1990s, Russia, had unrelentingly supported India's stand on Kashmir at the UN (in 1957, 1962, and 1971) and the UNSC, and stood steadfast with India during the Indo-Pakistani conflict. Also worth noting is that Russia devotes nearly 4.3% of GDP to its defence, whereas India spends 2.1 % of its GDP on military, according to data collected by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and World Bank (Table 1).

This partnership between India and Russia has remained till this day, particularly during times when the U.S. was not a partner of India. In 2010, the Declaration of Strategic Partnership (signed by Putin and Vajpayee) was upgraded to a special and privileged strategic partnership; in 2019, when India (under the Modi regime) scrapped Article 370 which provided special status to Jammu and Kashmir, Russia refrained from interfering, calling it India's "internal matter"; and the year 2021 marked both the 10th anniversary of the special and privileged strategic partnership, and 50 years since the Indo-Soviet Treaty on Peace (1971), the joint statement of which reads "Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity," with wide coverage on business, health, defence, and multilateralism.

This relationship between India and Russia has however become more complicated amidst rising U.S.-China rivalry (chiefly due to closeness between Russia and China). India's geopolitical strategy has geared towards establishing a U.S.-Russia equilibrium to curb China's growing dominance — India can no longer discount the reality of having to co-exist with a hegemon. Since the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, relationships between Russia and the West have down-spiralled, leading Russia to ascribe more worth to China and India as they have both backed Russia on Crimean issues at the UN, despite India having joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2017.

In the last few years, India became tactically closer to the U.S. The institutionalisation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) gave new impetus for India and the U.S. to collaborate and focus on the Indo-Pacific region. Besides a shared obligation to shape a tactical relationship, since 2016, the U.S. has designated India as a Major Defense Partner, with New Delhi and Washington penning defence agreements. The Biden administration has also reaffirmed its commitment to support India's permanent membership in a reformed UNSC and New Delhi's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (Press Trust of India, 2022).

Needless to say, China is another potential flashpoint between India and Russia. Even though both countries want to cut their financial dependence on China, they hold different opinions and follow dissimilar strategies in face of China's ascendancy — India mainly sees China as a constant rival (especially after the border dispute at Galwan Valley in May to June 2020), while Russia views China as a tactical partner. The possibility of a Russia-India-China trilateral strategic cooperation is therefore slim, as such multilateralism and shifting alliances create a fragile power balance between India,



Russia, the U.S., and China. Considering their long historical ties, it is hardly surprising that the Indian administration and the citizens have opted to take remain neutral while the rest of the global community strongly denounces and sanctions Russia. Clearly, India wants to hold onto its strategic ties and partnership with Russia as it needs Russia's backing in resolving border clashes with its neighbours (especially China), as well as financial and military support. There has been the sentiment in India that, since Russia has repeatedly sided with India at the UN on Kashmir, India should now return the favour.

A further point of concern relates to cooperation in space. India has already been cooperating with the U.S. and EU in several space projects. Unfortunately, sanctions imposed on Russia have led to ROSCOSMOS withdrawing its engineers from the Guiana Space Center, site of the European Space Agency (ESA)'s operations to launch its Copernicus and Galileo global navigation satellite systems. While the European Commission claims that this would have no consequence on the continuity of its navigation services, it is undeniable that the withdrawal will impact their launch schedule, which depends on Russian Soyuz rockets (Bhandari, 2022). On the other hand, in December 2021, after a visit from Putin, India released a joint statement with Russia in which the two agreed to enhance cooperation between ROSCOSMOS and the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) in various domains — human spaceflight, satellite navigation, development of launch vehicles, and planetary exploration. This joint statement was an addition to an existing MOU between ROSCOSMOS and ISRO (CBS NEWS, 2022). Russia's recent declaration to pull out of the International Space Station project after 2024 may trigger strong cooperation in space among Russia, China, and India.

At this juncture we can therefore see why, on the Ukraine war, it is unsurprising that India should adopt a strategic ambivalence, but it is also treading a tightrope. While India does not want to condone (Russia's) aggression, considerable public neutrality toward Russia has also been engendered. At the UNSC, UNGA, and UNHRC, India has abstained from chiming in on the West's strong, unanimous condemnation of Russia, and refused to outright label Russia the perpetrator. This choice to distance itself from the Ukraine war and tacitly tolerate Russia is less apprehensiveness towards upsetting the established world order and more a geopolitical calculation to avoid estranging Russia, as doing so would destabilize the region and threaten India's security, despite drawing the ire of the West with such ostensible fence-sitting.

In a nutshell, the sequence of events and India's tense backroom diplomacy with Ukraine — including summoning the Russian and Ukrainian ambassadors to demand "urgent safe passage" for Indians stranded in Kharkiv and other war zones — explicate why India forwent a reproachful tone and adopted a more delicate narrative to mask its disappointment towards Russia. While wanting to convey dismay at Russia's actions, India also declined to unequivocally condemn Moscow, opting instead to reinforce the need to "respect [...] the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states," ask for "the immediate halt of aggression," openly express regret that the "route of diplomatic negotiation and mediation was given up," advising that global leaders should "return to



it” and that negotiation would be the best way to resolve disputes (Tellis, 2022). India also reiterated that “the global order is anchored on international law, [the] UN Charter and respect for [the] territorial integrity and sovereignty of states.” Such ambivalence toward Russian aggression was underpinned by India’s apprehension vis-à-vis China and Pakistan, both of whom India perceived as coercive. India assumes that an alliance with Russia can help to thwart any deepening Russia-China ties as well as relations with Pakistan sought by Russia. Another reason for this neutrality is India’s dependence on Russia for military acquisitions (partly because Russian weapons are typically cheaper than their Western counterparts) even though India has already been diversifying the sources of its arms purchases (in 2022, India received 36 French aircraft Rafale). This is, indeed, at odds with India’s pledge to protect the rule-based world order in the Indo-Pacific, especially as India’s global partners — both financial and strategic one — stand in solidarity while denouncing and sanctioning Russia. In turn, India’s opting out of that solidarity has left it in the company of China and Pakistan, both having been India’s long-standing rivals (Tellis, 2022). However, Indian officials are conscious of the perils associated with their neutrality towards Russia. The key moral from the Russia-Ukraine war is to have clear and unambiguous national interest. There is no doubt, thus, that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has put India in a difficult position with tough strategic choices, and India is buying time as it manoeuvres between the West and Russia, drifting towards the former but refusing to sever ties with the latter, all the while cohabiting with a China rising as a regional and global power competitor.

2. EU and China: Diplomatic aloofness or constructive engagement?

The EU’s approach towards China as set out in the “Strategic Outlook” Joint Communication of 12 March 2019 remains valid, but bilateral relations between the two economic giants have deteriorated, exposing immense ideological discrepancies. According to EU/EEAS (2022a) China’s counter-measures to EU sanctions (pertaining to human rights issues), economic coercion, and trade measures against the single market, as well as its position on the Ukraine war are all contributing to worsening the bilateral relations, but the EU continues to work with China not only as a partner for cooperation and negotiation, but also as an economic competitor and systemic rival.

In reality, the EU and China need one another economically. China is very dependent on the 420 million consumers in European markets, and China is the top export partner of the EU (Table 1). However, their ideological clash is damaging trade relations. The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) is a case in point on how principled diplomacy (Borrell, 2022) can hinder their relationship: the EU Parliament holds the ability to ratify international agreements, thus any EU members being sanctioned by China will put the overall agreement into a quagmire. In addition, though China’s initial stance on the Ukraine war was constructive neutrality in favour of a peaceful solution (in accordance with the Chinese golden rule of peaceful settlement of neighborhood conflicts), in the eyes of the EU, while peace has not been restored in Ukraine but trade relations between China and Russia have grown, especially in terms of energy, China has



already taken sides and has indirectly facilitated further brutality and carnage in Ukraine. To the EU, the more the war drags on, the more China's constructive "neutrality" becomes an abettor of Russia's perpetration of supplanting the international order and increasing its geopolitical influence. As Le Corre (2022) recalls: "Despite Beijing's so-called 'neutrality,' on 4 February 2022, Putin and Xi Jinping signed a joint communiqué declaring a 'friendship without limits' between their two states." Indeed, it is not the Ukraine war, but the very nature of China's relations with Russia that has caused the relationship between China and the EU to sour.

All countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected and upheld and the purposes and principles of the UN Charter should be jointly safeguarded [...] our relationship (China-Russia) features non-alliance, non-confrontation and non-targeting of any third party (Wenbin, 2022).

To the EU and its partners, this deliberately vague statement — contradictorily standing by the principles of the UN Charter but also backing a state that unlawfully exercises brutal, unprovoked aggression — is hardly acceptable. Moreover, China's tacit acceptance of the systematic destruction of a sovereign state (Ukraine) has rendered it an unmistakable supporter of Russia's agenda: for the two to stand together to "oppose further enlargement of NATO and call [for the abandonment of] its ideologized cold war approaches" (Rajagopalan, 2022). The EU and its partners interpret the message of the statement — 1. friendship between China and Russia has no limit; 2. there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation; 3. any strengthening of bilateral strategic cooperation neither targets any third-party country, nor is affected by the changing international environment or circumstantial changes in any third-party countries — as a fragility of China, which, as history has shown, will prove to be a major source of problems. "Necessity is clearly pushing Russia and China together, but it remains to be seen how long it will last" (Rajagopalan, 2022).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic and especially since February 2022, China's branding and image within the EU and its partners have plunged. Beijing's willingness to embrace and magnify EU divisions in the early stages of the pandemic has led to backlash both in European public opinion and among governmental elites, who have become irritated by China's aggressive discourse (Le Corre, 2022). In terms of macro-economics, Chinese FDI has dropped considerably (MERCIS, 2022), despite a significant surge in 2020. As Table 1 depicts, China is the EU's second trading partner in export and first in import. However, the situation deteriorated when China sanctioned Lithuania (an EU member state) for opening a new office in Formosa, bringing uncertainty to the future of Sino-EU bilateral relations.

EU-China relations will also have heavy implications on the Belt and Road Initiative (B&RI). Ukraine, first of all, plays an important role in the Eurasia land belt of the B&RI: Since 2016, China and Ukraine have signed USD 2.95 billion worth of construction contracts under the B&RI in sectors such as transport and energy (including sustainable energy and gas). According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry (Xinhua, 2022), Ukraine-China trade increased by 47.5 percent year-on-year to 9.37 billion U.S. dollars in the first



half of 2021, and a direct freight train linking Ukraine and China was established. These projects have, however, been severely disrupted by the Ukraine war. On the other hand, for the 16 states in Central and Eastern Europe (hereafter CEE) that have cooperative relationships with China, most of them are receiving large numbers of refugees and are sending assistance to Ukraine. They will be rethinking and reevaluating their relationships with China, particularly as China appears to be an apologist for Russia.

As Le Corre suggests (2022), Sino-European relations has reached a tipping point, and there is a risk that the Ukraine war and Beijing's stance on advancing a strong relationship with Russia might deeply affect relationships with the EU and CEE in the long term. As Hussain suggests, however, China still has some wiggle room (2022): "Ukraine's integration into the ambitious rail network linking China with Europe, by providing alternative routes bypassing Russia, would be acceptable to the EU, the U.S., and Russia, too, could be open to China taking a lead on brokering a sustainable ceasefire, especially if it means lifting some sanctions."

3. China-Russia: Paradox with Chinese Characteristics

One of the main reasons that China adopted a constructive neutrality was its own sense of a potential vulnerability. Neutrality allows China to bide its time, and such deliberate wait to pragmatically evaluate the best option in light of the national interest is a typical Chinese characteristic. Several scholars have also defended China on taking this stance: Among them, Bi (2022) argues that the neutrality "is crucial, not only for its own interest but also for world stability ... [it] is not purely commercial, [but] is driven by a mix of humanitarianism, pragmatism, and political realism." Bi goes on to suggest that: Beijing's current principled and impartial neutrality should be appreciated. In the age of the toxic mix of weapons of mass destruction and mass dissemination of fake news of various kinds, it is time to leave some room for dialogue, peace, and neutrality towards an inclusive, indivisible, and enduring security for all (2022).

A wider reason that prompted such neutrality was China's geopolitical quandary, in which all options seem equally undesirable. China is particularly disturbed by the possibility of nuclear escalation and global economic disarray. According to Nathan and Scobell (2014): "Despite its impressive size and population, economic vitality, and drive to upgrade its military, China remains a vulnerable nation surrounded by powerful rivals and potential foes." Furthermore, the war in Ukraine drives China into five intertwining dilemmas:

- (1) China needed to be sympathetic to Russia's self-perceived vulnerability against a possible NATO eastward expansion, and China has reiterated that "Russia's legitimate security demands ought to be taken seriously and Russia's legitimate security demands ought to be taken seriously and properly addressed" (MFA-PRC, 2022 and Indian Express, 2022). However, China cannot and should not support Russian separatists' agenda in east Ukraine and Moldova (Transnistria). Doing so will contradict the principle of not interfering in a third state's domestic affairs, as well



as the “One-China policy” vis-à-vis the South China Sea and Formosa. Furthermore, China is particularly uncomfortable with Russian nuclear rhetoric;

- (2) China has worked tirelessly to build and repair its branding and image in the EU, negotiating the 2003 China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership and the 2020 EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. Both can be game changers in their bilateral relations. However, the EU sees China’s constructive neutrality as pro-Russia, which undermines their bilateral relationships, potentially leading to more troubles ahead, i.e., the European Parliament voting down any attempts to further and/or strengthen cooperation;
- (3) China’s constructive neutrality may open the door for diplomacy with potentially huge domestic and external benefits. If China can work with both Russia and Ukraine under the UN framework, it may be able repair its global image and divert the focus away from its internal affairs, ultimately giving it a chance to reinforce the Eurasian part of the B&RI. However, as Europe strengthens its unity and fortifies alliance with the U.S., China will find it increasingly difficult to play mediator on the world stage. China has already decided that it would be “politically naive to alleviate its awkwardly arranged relations with Russia by aligning with the United States, Russia’s greatest rival” (Deng, 2022);
- (4) Currently, still very much engaged in the trade war imposed by the Trump administration, China blames the U.S. for promoting a Cold War mentality among the elites. Since the inauguration of Biden, the Chinese administration has initiated “baby steps” to de-escalate the hostility. This has however proved difficult, as it has been complicated by the rearmament of Formosa and China’s worries and apprehension in light of the day-to-day outcomes of the Ukraine war, as well as its ‘no-limits’ friendship with Russia. These military, economic, and political events, having all driven Russia into a corner, are making China lose face for having vowed unconditional partnership with Russia, brandished via the 4 February 2022 joint statement;
- (5) Russia and the EU are, respectively, China’s largest and second-largest trading partners, with different trade profiles. However, in 2021, total trade between EU and Russia was worth almost twice of that between China and Russia. China-Russia trade was driven by oil, gas, coal and weaponry. According to SIPRI, between 2017 and 2021, approximately 80% of China’s total arms imports originated from Russia, accounting for 21% of Russia’s total arms export. Further, according to the *Financial Times* (March, 2022), “Russia has requested military assistance from China to maintain its invasion of Ukraine. According to intelligence the U.S. shared with allies, Russia requested supplies including surface-to-air missiles, drones, intelligence-related equipment and armoured and logistics vehicles.” The performance of Russian military equipment during the first phase of the Ukraine war has been disastrous. This is alarming for China, as it has direct impact on building up its military might.



As regards the negative impact of Western sanctions on Russia, Efremov (2022) states that the Russian economy "is facing its biggest recession since at least the 1990s, that is, since the collapse of the USSR," despite exhausting ways to circumvent them. It is also important to understand the geopolitical context: "China's interest in weakening Russia, Serbia's interest in joining the EU, Turkey's more critical view, Kazakhstan's official disagreement to recognize the independence of parts of Ukraine, the development of energy exports by Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan bypassing Russia" (Efremov, 2022).

Adding to the above five dilemmas is that China's relationship with Russia is driven from the Russian side by the geopolitics of a sort of pragmatic neo-Eurasianism that recalls the idea of Russia as an empire, which was culturally closer to Asia than to Western Europe. In 1997, Dugin called for the demise of Atlantism in Eurasia, the refusal to allow liberal values to dominate Russia, and the rebuilding of its influence through annexations and alliances. As Ingram (2001) explains:

"Since the rise of Vladimir Putin to the Russian presidency, Dugin's prominence has increased, and Russia's official Eurasianist orientation has been consolidated. During the Yeltsin era, figures such as Dugin were officially regarded as beyond the pale, but under Putin, proclamations of Russia's *derzhavnost* (great power status) have become not just acceptable, but a genuine component of official discourse, and oppositionists have found much to praise in Putin's programme".

This neo-Eurasianism is both dividing and uniting China and Russia: China supports neither annexation nor alliance, and events in places such as Georgia-Ossetia, Chechenia, Moldavia-Transnistria, and even regarding Russia's association with Belarus make China uncomfortable for a number of historical reasons, but Beijing welcomes the idea of driving Western influences out of Eurasia, a fact that has led to China's support of a number of institutional arrangements such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the creation of organizations/initiatives such as the SCO, the partnership for Greater Eurasia, and BRICS. Indeed, it is important to note that SCO is the largest in-regional organization in the world in terms of geographical coverage and population, covering three-fifths of the Eurasia and nearly half of the Earth's population. Likewise, in relation to BRICS, an organization that has global ambitions, Wang Yi (2022), China's state councilor and foreign minister, told an online meeting of BRICS foreign ministers that "China proposes to start the BRICS expansion process, explore the criteria and procedures for the expansion, and gradually form a consensus" (Reuters, 19 May, 2022). These two Chinese perceptions of Russia's pragmatic neo-Eurasianism explain why China turned a blind eye to Russia's regional domination, believing itself to be strong enough to withstand any Russian encroachment into China, at the same time aligning with Russia occasionally for circumstantial mutual benefits, to advance a bilateral relationship, and to create institutions capable of counteracting the U.S.'s enduring global influence. Nevertheless, in September 2022, on the margins of the SCO summit, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin met and the narrative of the annexation of the occupied territories in Ukraine and the possible use of nuclear weapons, were not welcomed by the Chinese delegation.



Russia's major structural problems persist and will become more visible and increase the effects of sanctions (Efremov, 2022): "the lack of an independent judiciary in Russia, corruption and unprofessionalism of the judiciary at all levels"; the "low level of federalization and autonomy of the regions actually contribute to the growth of poverty and instability in the regions that do not have the tools to ensure their economic development — even resource-rich regions have no motivation to develop international relations, since VAT in its entirety and most other taxes are taken by the center, while the income tax actually also remains in Moscow; The migration inflow to the capitals of the regions, the general decline in the population, the brain drain and the depopulation of small towns" — All of these structural problems impact China's wait-and-see attitude, as potential gains and reputation are affected. Nevertheless, is important to make it clear that, historically, China and Russia have a sinusoidal relationship with very large amplitudes. The new ascendance was initiated with the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, signed by Jiang Zemin and Vladimir Putin, on 16 July, 2001. However, twenty years ago, China was diverse and had completely different internal and external goals.

5. Conclusion

This research has illuminated the possible implications of a China-Russia partnership and India's role in the Ukraine war, for the security dimension of the EU. Political pundits agree that immediate and long-term impacts of the Ukrainian crisis need to be evaluated at the EU, Europe, and worldwide levels to confirm the substantial costs of this conflict. Mearsheimer believes that the prospect for harmony has gone. Russia will not lay down its arms the gains made in Eastern Ukraine, whereas the West cannot bear their sustained occupation. Mearsheimer's logic points in the course: if there is no peace the only reasonable consequence is continuing fighting and unending fighting will plausibly lead to escalation (Mearsheimer, 2014). To make things worse, the questioning about the legitimacy of the Russian veto power at UNSC (Table 2) is growing, putting at jeopardy all the international security. This perfect storm is also an exceptional chance for the EU to rethink its future and measure its historical vulnerabilities and fault lines. The Russia-Ukraine conflict embodies the fourth asymmetric shock that the EU and Europe have felt recently after the 2008 financial crisis, the BREXIT and the COVID-19 pandemic – The looming possibility of a global international security system disarray.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict in the context of EU-China and EU-India relations poses six major security challenges:

1. The change from a unipolar-hegemonic to a diffuse-multipolar international order (or a multipolarity driven by two poles), with China being part of it, will push Europe and the EU to systemic insecurity, with direct consequences in the economic, investment and development sectors and indirect effects in the crisis response mechanisms;
2. EU-China ideological clashes raised by the pragmatic neo-Eurasianism shared by China and Russia, will pose global governance insecurity, with particular emphasis on climate



change, decarbonization of the global economy, global commons governance, institutional financialism and the militarization of outer space. China will continue pushing for a constructive engagement and EU will endure for a stronger Chinese international activism;

3. In addition to five intertwined dilemmas, a possible de facto and de jure China-Russia alignment will add a new level of geopolitical insecurity, especially in Eurasia, forcing a swift development of the European defence sector at the expense of all other sectors associated with development and globalization. The defense budgets are expected to divert resources from other public sectors with large public impact. These facts will drive EU members towards a stronger commitment to NATO but also to a greater internal public dissatisfaction;
4. A China-Russia political alignment also represents a huge geopolitical risk for China. "If Russia's war against Ukraine leads to victory for Ukraine or a stalemated quagmire, the instability of the Putin regime will grow exponentially" (Pyziur & Motyl, 2022). Indeed, it is necessary to consider the scenario in which Russia collapses and transforms into a series of independent states — that will be a geopolitical nightmare not only for China but also for the EU. Moreover, in September 2022, the public narrative between China and Russia has suffered a sudden adjustment, as Xi and Putin hold first meeting since Ukraine invasion began (Samarkand, Uzbekistan) on sidelines of the SCO. The accession of Iran will reinforce the importance of SCO as an alternative to neo-liberal world order, but China-Russia relation appears to be to resemble a necessary ideological alignment, that advances the benefits of an economic pragmatism. Moreover, the use of nuclear weapons is simply not acceptable to China.
5. India will continue to play a double-faced game, capitalizing on its relations with Europe and Russia, while growing and reaching a level of self-confidence to compete directly with China. As the most populated state in the world and a leading economic powerhouse, India's pursuit of a permanent seat on the UNSC requires effective bilateral relations with all current UNSC members. But ambivalence also has a political cost, that EU institutions may not ignore. That can be another pressure factor to (in)securitization in relation to the trilateral geopolitical game in the Eurasia and Indo-Pacific regions;
6. Russia's intention to develop an independent space program will induce another insecurity, as outer space is no longer regarded as an area of international cooperation, but another competitive domain, perhaps with stronger militarization than before. Space tends to be part of another global divide.

Regarding specifically the EU and India vis-à-vis the Ukraine conflict, India will likely buy time by maintaining a pragmatic, non-hostile neutrality. Indeed, India will continue to take advantage of long-term relations with Russia (and China), being part of the BRICS and the SCO and, at the same time pushing an emerging and growing partnership with the U.S. The situation is ever dynamic and the targets are constantly moving, as each



state within the realist school wants to leverage relations to their own advantage in the globally interconnected world. The EU and Europe should not expect to rely on India as an extended partner, even if there is considerable ideological political common ground.

Russia's actions in Ukraine, which is not compatible with the international responsibilities vested in a permanent member of the UNSC, pose enormous risks for EU, China and India. All things considered, there is a real possibility that the Ukraine war will entail a new international order, based on a diffused bipolarity or a multipolarity driven by two poles, which is, by definition, an insecure solution for a challenging international order - This is an important reason for the EU, India, and China to come together and cooperate to facilitate a peaceful solution of the conflict.

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