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Why China's Foreign Policy Remains Neutral (?) in Regard to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine? A Grand Strategy Analysis through an Offensive Realist Prism

The purpose of this paper is to elucidate the problem of China's ambiguous neutral stance towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For around a two-month period (i.e., between February and April) since Russia's invasion of Ukraine began on February 24th 2022, there has been no clear diplomatic message from Beijing concerning its final choice of position between Ukraine and its quasi-ally Russia. Parallel to this obscurity in China's foreign policy, there are numerous arguments (this paper lists eight of them) that attempt to speculate Beijing's next move based on their respective rationales that might prompt China to aid Russia's military venture or abandon support for its quasi-ally. In this paper, the researcher tries to study China's neutrality through an offensive realist prism and frame these arguments into two major underlying *raison d'état*: 1) to immediately rebalance the power equilibrium in the system by aiding Russia and soliciting it into China's coalition—namely, to change the configuration of the units in the system; 2) to sustain the positive relative gains in long-term until China surpasses the USA by abandoning Russia, thereby buying time as a diplomatic *détente* with United States—namely, to change the systemic capability distribution among its units. By comparing the weight of the two *raison d'états* through an examination of the eight major arguments respectively, the researcher concludes that the inextricable uncertainty of gains/losses between the two antinomic grand strategy approaches is exactly the reason that causes Beijing's obscure attitude of neutrality between the two belligerents.

Introduction

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022, the War in Ukraine has now been continuing for over a year already. Besides the two conflictual parties on the battlefield, the two great powers' attitudes towards this war are the significant factors that can essentially mold the development of this geopolitical conflict.

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Between this dyad, the United States' foreign policy is clear: to protect Ukraine's sovereignty and restore peace in the Eastern Europe region, whereby it can concentrate its resources on the Asia hegemonic struggle. However, China's foreign policy on its quasi-ally Russia's military adventure till now remains a tightrope walker (e.g., on April 4th, Wang Yi reaffirmed Beijing's neutral position on the Ukraine-Russia war when speaking with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba over the phone) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022; Reuters, 2022). Beneath this, Beijing's attitude of neutrality is a dilemma choice derived from the uncertainty of gains/losses between the support-Russia (pros) approach and the abandon-Russia (cons) one. There are eight major arguments for both approaches listed below:

Pros:

1) From the system level, in the structural realist point of view, the aid to the middle power (Russia's military venture) can woo it to more closely side with Beijing, together vis-à-vis the United States in the imminent struggle (i.e., Russia has made itself an enemy of Washington through its February invasion after all);

2) From a regional geopolitical level, due to their proximity, Russia can be either a valuable ally to counter-balance the United States allies' pressure in North-East Asia (e.g., the bilateral disputes like the Kuril Islands between Russia and Japan that is surely a benefit to Beijing's security), as well as to distract US' resources away from the Asia region (the Russian threat becomes salient again from Washington's perspective that it is one of the repercussions of this war) or become a deadly threat to China's survival as the two countries' history shows;

3) From the energy security dimension, Russia's energy imports remain strategically important for China's sustainability of its economic development: e.g., in 2020, Russia remains the biggest source of China's mineral fuels/oils and the products of their distillation imports – occupying 13.1% of total China's relevant consumption that year, the second biggest country is Saudi Arabia – 11.1%. Therefore, by aiding Moscow in its invasion of Ukraine, China can undoubtedly guarantee this important energy source;

4) From an international political aspect, aiding Russia can gain its cooperation in the various international organisations to leverage China's soft power, e.g., the aligned vote in the UNSC.

Cons:

1) On the international structure level, maintaining a stable relationship between China and the EU will benefit China's national interest in terms of grand strategy. Because of the upcoming bipolar hegemonic competition,

China needs the European Union as an alternative end market to circumvent the US offshore balancing (Mearsheimer, 2001) and containment in Asia, and aiding Russia will be a self-defeating move of this essential strategy;

2) On the geopolitical level, since the 1990s, Ukraine has been not just exporting its agriculture products to China, but what is even more important is that it provides excellent weapon experts that help China to obtain crucial military technologies after the West has put an embargo on it since the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre. From the 1990s, rocket and naval techniques cooperation to recent years' turbofan engine for PLA's warplane industry, Ukraine is one of the most vital sources for China's military industry development (Medeiros, 1996; Rutkowska & Adamczyk, 2019; Poita, 2022). Moreover, the geographical remoteness between the two countries creates an excellent cooperative environment without any geopolitical dispute. By aiding Russia's invasion, Beijing will undoubtedly lose Ukraine's cooperation—including its role in China's Belt and Road Initiative.

3) In the economic dimension, the Chinese economy is still mainly relying on international trade as well as technological cooperation, aiding Russia will ineluctably irritate the Western bloc and put itself in peril of sanctions.

4) Concerning the domestic politics aspect, the numerous 'red princes' and their relatives living in the West will inevitably suffer the potential sanctions like that have been imposed on the Russian oligarchs which will lead to huge interests conflict between some red princes and Xi.

Apparently, many of these arguments discussed above can be mutually qualitatively offset, and this explains Beijing's ambivalent attitude to this war and why China has remained neutral until now. For example, on the one hand, China needs Russia's energy supplies to sustain its economic growth; meanwhile, aiding Russia will make China lose its Western market—this will bring an end to Beijing's hope that the EU can remain neutral and continue its economic cooperation with China during its future security competition vis-à-vis with the USA on the other. Maybe the key here is how to quantitatively measure the potential outcome of these pros and cons and then formulate a calculus result. However, before doing that, how do we define the basis of such a calculus result derived from both opinions? Does Beijing only care about its economic gains? Or, is Beijing acting in a realist sense as a great power? Does it care about soft power and the influence of IGOs? Or, does Beijing's ruler care more about his own political survival than national survival, which allows us into a two-level game model analysis (Putnam, 1988: 427-460, 458-459)? These inquiries undoubtedly give rise to an impulse for intelligentsia to think that, to predict China's next move, all these questions need to be scrutinised through

detailed analyses and sufficient debates.

In this article, the researcher attempts to apply an offensive realist perspective to elucidate China's foreign policy bewilderment. Far removed from the angle that people try to speculate the Beijing elites' motive, which could be distinguished by its goals, communist values, etc., the researcher of this article only focuses on grand strategy level's factors (i.e., under the presumption that China is behaving as a rational state actor) that can increase China's survival likelihood. Thus, the only distinct variable being analysed here is the factor that can change the dynamics in the balance of power regarding China. Ergo, the core logic that the researcher posits in this paper is that on a strategic level, whether China should aid Russia according to its national interests (Mearsheimer, 2001: 30-32), and whether it is actually a double-choice question between: 1) an immediate rebalance of the power equilibrium by gaining Russia into its coalition (i.e. to change the balance of power by changing the configuration of states' bloc belonging); and 2) a long-term obtainable winner of the hegemonic competition through sustaining its positive relative gains vis-à-vis United States (i.e. to change the balance of power by changing the system's distribution of capability between China and United States gradually). In the following discussion the researcher will analyse the eight arguments involving these two grand strategies and inspect their weight in contributing to one or the other approaches, respectively.

Offensive Realism and its Relevance to this Research

Offensive realism is one of the two major branches of structural realism, it is based upon five assumptions: 1) the international system is anarchic; 2) great powers have some military capability; 3) states can never be certain about other states' intentions; 4) survival is the primary goal of great powers; 5) great powers are rational actors (Mearsheimer, 2001: 30-32).

All these five assumptions are indispensable for entailing the offensive realism power-seeking argument driven by fear because if great powers don't care about their own survival, they don't need to fear each other and, thus, power is needed no more. Or, if the international system is hierarchical, they might still have to fear for their own survival, but they can seek aid from the IGOs' legal procedure to protect themselves instead of relying on their own power. Or, if they all do not possess the military capability, then their survival will not be threatened by each other as well. Or, if they know each other's intentions with a high degree of certainty, then if they all have sufficient

military means to destroy each other in the anarchic international arena, they can always outmanoeuvre the intending aggressor in advance without fear or power-seeking. Finally, if great powers are not rational, then there can be no theoretical explanation of their behaviour; therefore, the theory loses its explanatory power and predictive power as well.

Albeit, in comparison with classical realism's relentless journey for absolute power, say, Morgenthau's *animus dominandi* (Morgenthau, 1945: 1-18, 13), offensive realism remains a great power's goal in enhancing security for its own survival's sake and treats power as a means rather than the end per se. However, the school perceives a great power's survival likelihood is proportionate to its share in the system's distribution of capability—in other words, the relative power matters (Mearsheimer, 2001: 60; Waltz, 1979: 191)—the bigger positive power gap between a great power and the rest of its kind, the more secure for its survival is (Mearsheimer, 2001: chapter 2 & 4).

Therefore, to secure a great power's survival is ipso facto to maximize its relative power vis-à-vis other great powers; hence, a great power ought to contemplate a balance of power logic when it tries to formulate its optimal grand strategy. In this research, the two grand strategy approaches to explain China's stance on the Ukraine war both departed from this offensive realism rationale.

The Grand Strategy at Systemic Level: China's Grand Strategy Choice - Russia?

The unipolarity established in 1991 since the collapse of the Soviet Union has already ended; we are in a bipolar system now. The structural property determines the two principal states in this system will inevitably conduct an intensive competition against each other so as to ensure their own survival. Further, as bipolarity goes, this United States-China would be even more intensive and risky than the former against the Soviet Union during the Cold War due to Asia's geographic setting, as the economic gap of the USA-China dyad is now much narrower than that of USA-USSR during the Cold War. The peril of this systemic arrangement prompts either great power of this dyad to try their best to solicit/coalesce any possible ally to join their bloc in order to enhance their likelihood of winning this hegemonic competition.

For present-day China, there is no doubt it has much economic cooperation throughout the world; however, the lack of soft power and its

obsolete materialist communist ideology lead to it having few true allies, partly because of its increasing policy of prestige (Morgenthau, 1948: chapter 4) through military deployments within the dispute effective regional territories and the boundary of territorial waters (Cohen, 2015) like that in the Sino-Indian border, South and East China Sea, etc. also the 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy' since approximately 2017 that bogs itself down in self-encirclement (Snyder, 1993)—even North Korea's relation with it is remaining upon pure pragmatic interests calculation. However, the imperative need to strengthen its coalition power along with the internal build-up for China to carry out the imminent struggle against the United States is utmost. It has to seek every potential ally that it can woo into its coalition, and Russia is undoubtedly one of the best options.

The reason is, besides adding Russia's huge nuclear arsenal and a relatively strong military, to largely tilt the balance of power to such an extent that, similar to every United States Cold War warrior's nightmare in the 1960s, 'an ominous warband combination of the world's most populous nation with a nuclear superpower' (Kissinger, 1994: 722), Russia per se will provide such a possibility for China to gain its alliance. This *raison d'état* behind Russia's bloc choice is mainly derived from two issues:

1) the February invasion has fundamentally changed Russia's position in the West's security agenda; before that, as we witnessed during the former United States President Trump's administration, there was a clear tendency to approach Russia as a potential partner to contain China's rise. In spite of accepting the United States' olive branch is indeed the optimal strategy for Russia's national interests, which could have gained it the status that China had gained in the year 1972 (i.e. in such a scenario, we can speculate under its new Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin's digital technocracy approach, revitalising Russia's economy could no doubt contribute to Putin's kleptocratic regime's legitimacy thereby it can be lasting even longer), whereas Putin's military adventure now leave Russia to have no choice but must side with China to support its future.

2) as mentioned in the 1) issue that Putin's kleptocracy is losing ground in Russia's domestic politics, as every regime declining legitimacy does, Putin has been trying to seek every possibility to enhance his government's support: from the Great Patriotic War propaganda to the revitalisation of the Russian Orthodox, and the radical ideologies like that of Aleksandr Dugin's Eurasianism in its intelligentsia as well as the far-right Russian Imperial Movement in its milieu—all these official socialisation or groups backed by the Kremlin are for one propose only—that is to underpin its losing support among the ordinary Russians, and all these domestic dynamics are all converging in a point that is the Russian nationalism. For the sake of survival, as any authoritarian

regime does, the Kremlin's owner will not hesitate to use the nationalist force to underpin his regime. Further, as an exchange, Putin needs to please these Russian nationalist groups through his foreign policy; the protracted conflict in Ukraine since 2014 and this February invasion are the gambles for him to regain the support. Further, because of the scale and severe outcome of this invasion, he has to put his political reputation and vast national resources as a chip on the wargame table, and China is the most valuable source for him to win or achieve a successful settlement in this military venture.

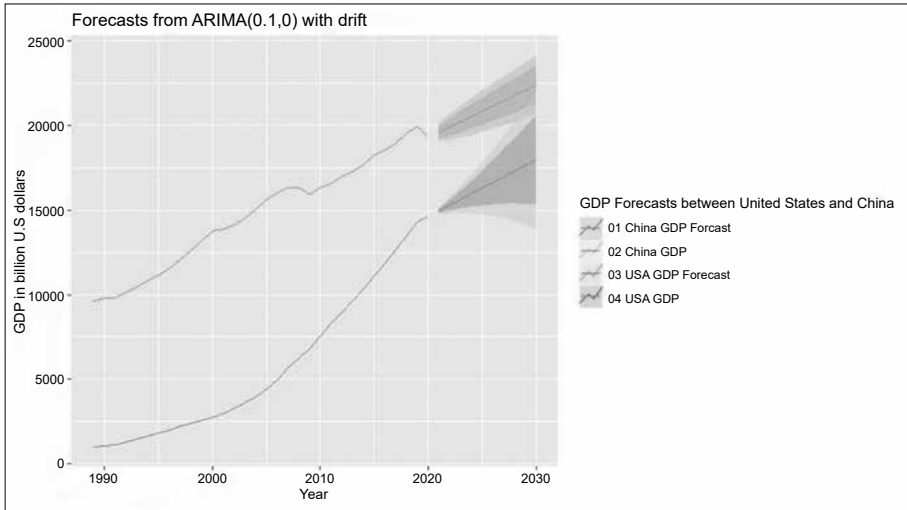
Therefore, as the pros 1) argument indicates that it is reasonable for China to expect its aid to the middle power Russia's February military venture can woo it more closely side with Beijing together vis-à-vis the U.S. in the imminent struggle—the 1st grand strategy's *raison d'état* mentioned in the beginning of this paper. Further, if such an approach succeeds, then the United States security's fundamental element of maintaining the balance of power on the Eurasian landmass through offshore balancing and containment, which have been set forth by George Kennan and followed by the later developments from John Gaddis and Robert Art's works (Kennan, 2012: chapter 1; Gaddis, 2005: Chapter 1, 2 & 12; Art, 2003; Evera, 2006: 84-96) is broken (Kennan, 1972; Kennan, 2012).

The Grand Strategy at Systemic Level: China's Grand Strategy Choice – EU?

On the contrary, because at the strategic level, the time is on China's side—the 2nd *raison d'état* mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The economic momenta in the China-USA dyad shows, *ceteris paribus*, the size of the economy of the former will very likely surpass that of the United States in the next decade (i.e., see Figure 01 below). Hence, regardless of whether there will be an escalation in different forms of conflict between the two or not, preserving this positive relative gains momentum as the key strategic advantage is vital for China's hegemonic competition against the United States. As a consequence thereof, how to fend off the United States' containment so as to maintain the positive relative gain pace in narrowing the economic gap between it and the United States has become a salient task for Beijing's policy maker to tackle. This is not just from some logical arguments like the state's economy is its 'Fourth arm of defence' (Peden, 1979: 65, 182), or 'one cannot break steel armour with fingernails alone', etc., but also from not long ago that the glaring example of the United States detrimental containment to the Soviet

Union economy during the last Cold War, which is still vividly alarming China to not to be bogged down in such an economic strangulation—an alternative option is imperative.

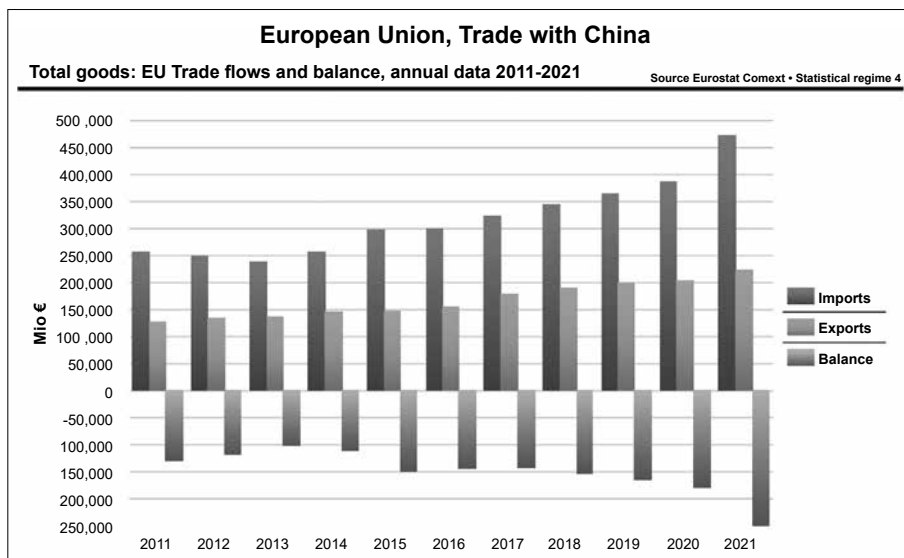
Figure 01: **GDP Forecasts between the United States and China**



** Raw data source: World Bank's DataBank, address: <https://databank.worldbank.org/home.aspx> .

The European Union (EU) is exactly such an alternative, say, served as a substitute for the potential lost market, a strategic end market. Figure 02 below shows the tendency of this bilateral economic relationship is more and more contributing to China's GDP in terms of external trade surplus. Furthermore, it is a fact that China also benefited from EU's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), which the amount is bigger than its own FDI in EU amid the ambition of Belt and Road Initiative withal (European Commission, 2020).

Figure 02: Total Goods: EU Trade with China Flows and Balance, Annual Data 2011–2021



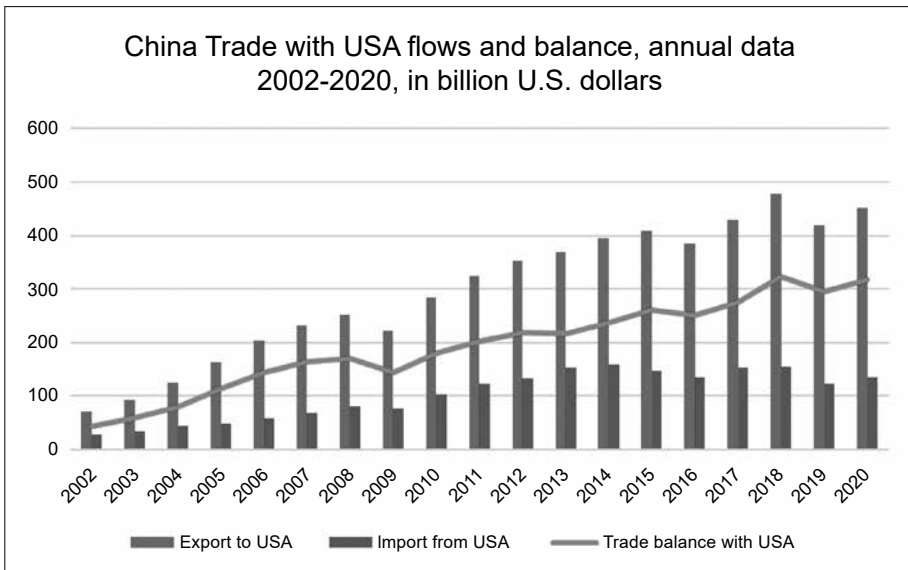
Source: European Commission, 2022.

Furthermore, after the United States former President Donald Trump's trade war policy against China, even though in hindsight the effects were marginal if it has not all come to nothing (i.e. see the illustration in Figure 03), whereas in the context of the rising peer competitor, concern become more and more severe in Washington's foreign policy establishment, be the United States market lucrative or not, for Chinese economic engine it can't put much hope to preserve this source. But a serious issue lies in this scenario is that without the United States market (i.e. in 2020, the total export amount is \$438 billion, which is China's biggest export destination and trade surplus source—16.5% of that year's total export. Further, if we take the 'grey export' through Hong Kong as an entrepôt into account, this percentage and the total amount of the export to the United States will be even bigger. (See Figure 04), How can China keep this neomercantilistic economic development pace that is continuously narrowing the capability gap between it and the United States once the United States market is closed to it? There is no doubt that the EU becomes a necessity for Beijing in such a scenario, and aiding Russia will do no good to ensure this resort.

Nonetheless, it does not matter how ambitious Beijing's political elites can be, without a relatively bigger economy in comparison with the United States, the predicament like Great Britain's Empire incurred on the eve of

WWII that ‘the preparations for war might weaken the capacity for war’ will inevitably befall on China. Hence, obtaining the goal described in the 2nd grand strategy/raison d’état mentioned at the beginning of this paper is undoubtedly a self-defeating move to aid Russia’s invasion and thus maim its own economic development—much less to sever the economic cooperation with its frère ennemi—the United States, so why rush to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs after all?

Figure 03: **China Trade with the United States Flows and Balance, Annual Data 2002–2020, in Billions of United States Dollars**



** Source: raw data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China.

China's Geopolitical Level Trade-Off: Regional Hard Security vs Belt and Road Initiative as Well as Energy Security vs Economic Sustainability

The systemic level factors discussed above regarding the ways to change units' configuration and systemic capability distribution as to China's national interests have been refined into two major grand strategy approaches. In the following geopolitical level discussion, due to the complexity and intricacy that does not allow people to exhaust all the possible factors that might affect the policy maker's intention—otherwise, the impedimenta of geopolitical analysis will totally deprive the policy decision-making process' efficiency. Ergo, the decision-making on the grand strategy level is always a bounded rationality process on analysing the accessible/assessable relevant geopolitical factors, and as to China's case, it is thus a heuristic one as well. Because of this limitation, we cannot expect the possibility of comprehensiveness in geopolitical factor analysis; meanwhile, we assume the policymaker can possess a sufficient understanding of these geopolitical factors' implications for national interests. Therefore, in this article, the researcher will only discuss two pairs of significant dilemmas (i.e. regional hard security vs. Belt and Road Initiative as well as energy security vs. economic sustainability) that their outcomes can underpin or undermine one or the other of the two grand strategy approaches.

The first pair of geopolitical dilemmas is the trade-off between the regional hard security concern and Beijing's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (i.e., hereinafter 'BRI'). As to the rationale for the regional hard security, in geopolitics, the connectivity or geographical distance between two countries proportionally determines the intensity of their interactions, and a closer distance without natural barriers, more often than not, implies more intensive geopolitical impacts between the countries due to they can easier to harm or benefit each other through various means.

In a negative sense, the China-Russia case is due to their geographical contiguity. For China, the relationship with Russia is inevitably constantly holding a salient position in Beijing's foreign policy agenda. Let alone the public opinion's persistent grudges over the lost territories like the city Haishenwei (i.e. Russia renamed it 'Vladivostok' after the occupation), pragmatically, the proximity with Russia forces China must take the vital national survival issue into account when it deals with the Russia issue. The historical records of Russia's behaviours (Kissinger, 1994: 703-732; Goldstein: 2003; Osborn & Foster, 2010; Reuters, 2018) have been a consistent alarm for Beijing's policymakers seriously consider the security factor in the China-Russia relationship, and this

also turned into one of the utmost factors in China's regional geostrategy – that is to avoid direct conflict with Russia in case it has yet to obtain absolute military supremacy vis-à-vis the latter so as to achieve a compelling effect (i.e. a sort of coercive blackmail prompts Russia's intransigence gives way to its own rational choice to prefer concession to be pulverised under a clear perception of the large asymmetry in the offence-defence balance (Glaser & Kaufmann, 1998) between it and China) (Schelling, 1966) whereby minimises the potential damage to itself during the conflict. Similarly, if the United States likes to give Russia a run for its money in regard to the latter's military venture in Ukraine, it can hardly deny that it is good for China's geopolitical security.

In a positive sense, the China-Russia case is due to Russia's own geopolitical setting, and cooperation with Russia can largely benefit China's security interests in the Asia region. This benefit is derived from two major rationales:

- 1) The growing besiegement for China is analogous to the Empire of Japan at the beginning of the 1940s, amidst the United States steadily evolving grand strategy in Asia due to losing offshore balance into a severe containment one. The serious diplomatic consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine between it and the United States would undoubtedly have a ripple effect that worsens its territorial conflict with the United States' ally, Japan, on the Kuril Islands. This can largely relieve China's pressure in the East China Sea and allow it more room to manoeuvre its relatively weak naval force in confronting the United States and its allies' sea power. Furthermore, it is feasible to conceive a possible synergy through coordinating with Russia's Pacific Fleet in the Northeast Asia region or, in an extreme scenario to have an Austro-Hungarian condominium-esque operation on the common territorial disputes against the United States' ally, Japan (see, Figure 05).

Figure 05: Japan, its Neighbours and Territorial Disputes.



Source: The European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), 2018.

2) As a repercussion of this Russia-Ukraine war, the United States security circle's idea of cooperating with Moscow to encircle China and to pivot Asia is in vain; the Russian threat once again has become salient in Washington's foreign policy agenda. The failure of securing an Operation Storm-333-esque quick victory in Ukraine is not only forcing Russia to treat Beijing as its last resort of external aid, but meanwhile, objectively, China has also benefited from the United States' resources by being pinned down in Europe without relocating into Asia. Furthermore, if the war becomes a protracted conflict in which both belligerents fail to achieve a decisive outcome on the battlefield, the United States and Russia's military capability will wither on the vine as a result of the inexorable attrition warfare between the two in Ukraine, let alone the potential escalation after both sides have invested significant political reputation into this war.

As for the rationale behind Beijing's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative as a factor in the first set of geopolitical dilemmas, assisting Russia's invasion is unquestionably negative, to put it bluntly. The reason is obvious and can be summarised through these three major issues: 1) the alienation of Ukraine; 2) the disrepute among Eastern European countries (i.e. hereinafter 'EECs'); and 3) the hindrance in the ASEAN' belt countries'.

Concerning 1) the alienation of Ukraine issue, the negative impact is axiomatic: one will immediately become someone's adversary if one supports another when they are under assault. This common sense works for the individual relations between people and the international relations between states as well. In the case of Ukraine, the bad outcome for China mainly

concerns the 2nd grand strategy, and it will thus lose the agriculture import source, military technology cooperation and the BRI coordination with the former.

Concerning issue 2) the disrepute among Eastern European countries, we can perceive the likely insidious anger among the EECs' public opinion regarding Beijing's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion. Along with this growing grievance, the inferior diplomatic publicity from the cliché explanation will apparently be of little help to salvage China's falling image among these countries. Although the EECs have never been a vital component of the BRI, all BRI projects must get through the EECs, whether in a concrete scene of transporting the goods between China and the Western European market or in an institutional sense by getting their votes in the European Union's co-decision mechanism (Ishmael, 2019).

Concerning issue 3) the hindrance in the ASEAN' belt countries', it is mainly about a ramification of aiding the Kremlin's military venture that brings a strong reaction from the United States (i.e. in the case of China's aid to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which is concrete and large in amount) and forcing its ASEAN allies to give up a large part of economic cooperation with China for continuing the United States' security protection.

The second pair of geopolitical dilemmas concerns the trade-off between China's energy security and its economic sustainability regarding foreign trade. This dilemma is a sort of chicken and egg situation: just as if we dialectically discuss money and good soldiers, which one should come first with Machiavelli when he was writing his *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*. Indeed, no productivity is available without energy, whereas having energy does not enable production as well—there is no causation in this relationship but only correlation. Both options in this dilemma are related to the 2nd grand strategy approach, which is about guaranteeing the economic momentum that is narrowing the economic gap between China and the United States.

In this dilemma, the researcher argues that for China's strategic goals in its economic development, its present economic cooperation with the West surpasses Russia's energy import. The reason for this is that if we ignore the characteristics of various forms of energy (e.g., that petroleum is always more significant than natural gas in terms of the military because the primary components of military hardware, such as tanks and warplanes, still use fuel as their sole source of energy, even though they are both used for economic consumption), as well as the quantitative modelling of various combinations of scenarios relating to regulatory policy, because in the year 2021, the international trade scale is approximately equal to 34.5% of China's GDP scale, net exports

occupy 3.85% of that year's China GDP (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2022). The deficit from the possible disruption of Russia's energy import can be offset by internal resilience, such as appropriation among different items in the government investment portfolio to subsidise the economy sector (i.e., reducing military expenditure, suspending large infrastructure projects, etc.). Further, as counter-arguments, the Russian energy source matters more than the foreign market can be summarised below:

In the year 2020, Russia remains the biggest source of China's mineral fuels/oils and the products of their distillation imports, occupying 13.1% of China's total relevant consumption that year; the second biggest country is Saudi Arabia, at 11.1% (i.e. see, Figure 06). If Russia's energy supply is disrupted, whether it is a total embargo by Moscow or just a partial sanction as a retaliation for China's diplomatic indifference, then there will be two negative results:

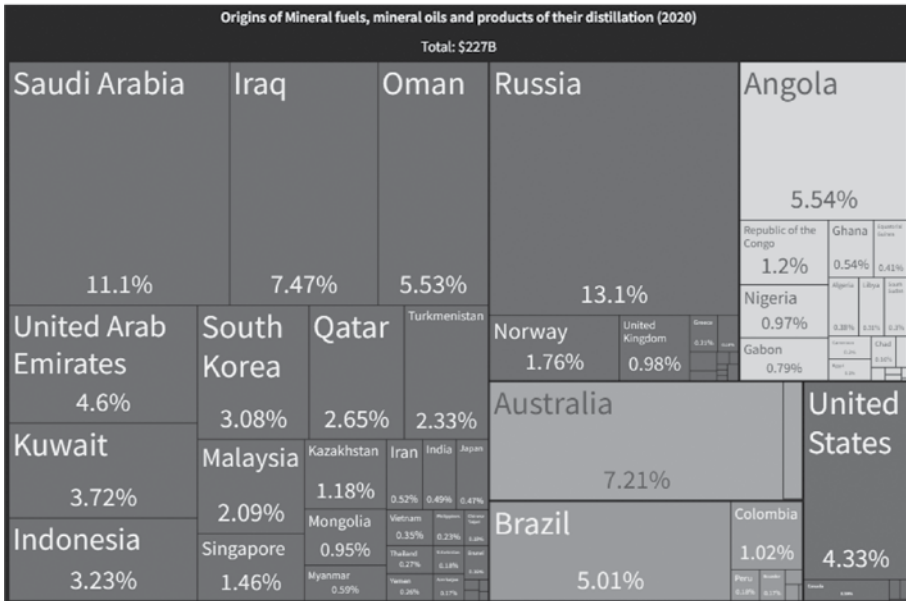
1) is a direct result that many Chinese products lost their comparative advantage. These products mainly belong to the labour intensive low, added-value products categories such as clothes, toys, etc., taking China's ageing demographic structure that has been making its labour costs more and more expensive in comparison to other ASEAN countries like Vietnam into account; the rising energy costs caused by the Russia's invasion war (see, the Figure 07) will definitely turn into a double whammy on China's economy.

2) is an indirect result that after China's energy diversity shrunken by the absence of Russian imports, the Middle East oil-rich countries will monopolise China's energy market (i.e. approximately 35% of China's total energy import in 2020), and this is definitely bad for Beijing to manage its energy security if there are few chips left for it to negotiate with these Middle East countries (Tan & Xu, 2022), much less many of them are Sunni Islamic states which are still relying on USA's military protection to confront the Iran proxies' Shia Crescent sectarian expansion. In other words, without Russia's energy source, during the conflict, the United States can easily strangle China's economy by exerting its leverage on its Middle East client states.

Even though these direct/indirect results from the counter-argument seemingly strongly highlight the disruption of Russia's energy could cause a rather serious impact on China's economic development. However, if we evaluate them from their original purpose—the 2nd grand strategy, which is not to aid Russia's invasion of Ukraine to maintain the relative gains vis-à-vis United States, then as 1) the direct result from the loss of Russia's energy source that will only quantitative lost some low added value product's exports on the one hand, and as a possible exchange that its high added value's product

like 5G, high-speed train, photovoltaics, etc. could have a more lenient export environment in the Western market, on the other; as to 2) the indirect result, provided this ‘détente’ foreign policy does work, the United States has no reason to strangle China’s energy consumption before it successfully dealing with Russia’s aggression in Eastern Europe. Hence, between the two options in this energy security-economic sustainability dilemma, abandoning Russia is in China’s interests in terms of continuously increasing its capability in the system—as the goal of the 2nd grand strategy.

Figure 06: **Origin of Mineral Fuels, Mineral Oils and Products of Their Distillation to China in 2020**



** Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC).

Figure 07: WTI Crude Oil (Nymex) Index
(5 years period price chart: 30/06/2017–27/06/2022)



** Source: Bloomberg, 2022.

The Conundrum of the Beijing's Policymaking — the Weight of Soft Power and Domestic Elite Struggle in its Foreign Affairs

For offensive realists, these two issues regarding China's policymaking are theoretically irrelevant. This does not mean they are not important or have no effect, but merely saying they are not the factors that are included in the offensive realist's analytical framework because the offensive realist, just like any other structural realist school theories or grand theory in general that '<...> first in order to have a theory you have to have a subject matter that you can't have a theory about everything' (Waltz, 2003). Or 'the limits of theory, of grand theory or realism, realism as most of your folks know is a theory that leaves domestic politics on the cutting room floor' (Mearsheimer, 2022). Nevertheless, soft power and domestic factors' effects are marginal in terms of a balance of power, but the marginal effect does not mean no effect or always little effect; therefore, beyond the theoretical domain, the researcher will discuss them in this case study as well.

Regarding the soft power, in Beijing's prospect, if we assume the 1st grand strategy as China's approach, which is to aid Russia's invasion, what can Russia reward as reciprocity in terms of soft power? There are some issues that

China can expect Moscow's cooperation, such as: externally, Taiwan relations, North Korea's sanctions (United Nations Security Council: S/PV.9048), Iran nuclear deal (Scita, 2022), Afghanistan rebuild, etc., and internally, human rights issues like the CCP's violations in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang or the suppression of Christian groups, various democratic movements, Falun Gong, etc. These issue-oriented cooperations at their highest level are the coordination of using the veto in the UN Security Council. Yes, as an old axiological theme debate about legality and legitimacy, for the UNSC's mechanism, one veto will do, but two or more is always better. However, from the researcher's point of view, taking Russia's image and reputation after its February invasion of Ukraine into account, how much 'bonus' legitimacy can China actually have when it bands up with the former to exert the veto in that world's utmost IGO's collective security unit? Even though, indeed, it is hard to find another occidental country in any intergovernmental organisation other than Russia to have such an institutional effect in terms of enhancing soft power for Beijing.

The domestic political struggle that affects China's foreign policy is essentially based on two logical assumptions or equations: 1) the individual's (i.e., the elites or ruler on the top of the political food chain) interests are above his/her party's interests, as is the ruling party's interests above the national interests in terms of human nature. And if the individual who runs the party and hence rules the state does not harm the interests of the party or state, it is only because he/she believes the costs of such a betrayal will outweigh his/her personal profits in the face of a high risk of being revealed. In other words, it is the consequence and risk as a counter-motive dissuading the individual with paramount domestic power from rationally choosing to exert royal behaviour instead of morality. 2) Is the perception or understanding of the ruling individual having more weight in the state's policy-making than this person's colleagues' perception/understanding of the same issue in the ruling party in terms of hierarchy?

Obviously, only when these two logical assumptions are not spurious that allow us to turn the foreign policy analysis into a two-level game model approach between the individual decision-making and the organisation's interests that the individual belongs to. Then, it is clear that as foreign policy-making goes, the state whose political system is more power-concentrated is more likely to have this 'principal-agent' problem, which enables us to apply the aforementioned two-level game model to figure out its foreign policy-making tendency. In China's case, because of the totalitarian attribute of the regime, we can use this two-level analysis to try to probe into the possibility of the choice of two grand strategies in Beijing's contemplation:

Firstly, if we take the first logical assumption into account and assume

the highly power-concentrated elite in China's political system, say, Xi cares more about his own political interests than the party or state's interests. In the case of the 1st grand strategy is more contributing to China's survival capability in terms of hegemonic struggle in the Asia region against United States, but meanwhile, this approach to aid Russia's invasion will backfire and put the numerous 'Red Princes' and their relatives who are living in the West into the peril of being sanctioned to the degree similar to that of imposed on the Russian oligarchs which definitely will lead to huge interests conflict between some red princes and Xi. This type of intra-party conflict among the highest-level CCP figures could lead to some disastrous consequences. For instance, in the crunch moment, the Red Prince Bo Xilai suddenly visited the 14th Group Army on February 10th, 2012—one month before he been politically ousted and Shuanggui. This case reveals how serious the conflict between the Red Princes could be, which with the consent of 14th Group Army and the Chengdu Military Region's 13th Group Army (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2013) (i.e. the 13th Group Army is the only 'strategic mobile force' in the PLA's former 18 Group Armies, it is specialised in mountain warfare also an 'A Class Group Army's (Chinese: "甲级集团军", which is full mechanised equipment)) general staffs, then Bo Xilai would have started a civil war to prevent his political life demise. Hence, let alone if the 1st grand strategy is good or bad for China's national interests, it is bad for Xi's political stability in the relationship with his Red Prince circle. Or, to put it differently, this seemingly becomes a perverse paradox which the more effective of China's aid to Russia's invasion that according to the 1st grand strategy approach is, the more unlikely it will be adopted by Xi.

Secondly, concerning the 2nd logical assumption of the Chinese ruling elite(s)' perception/understanding of the international affairs determines China's foreign policy decision making. Like Thomas Schelling states, 'But uncertainty exists. Not everybody is always in his right mind' (Schelling, 1966: 93); however, it doesn't matter how illogical a mind can be, insofar as the domestic power is highly concentrated, the international reality will invariably surmounted by its perception during the foreign policymaking process insofar as such a perception is perceived by the one(s)' whose power is dominant in the state's political system—in other words, the focal points about the perception of national interests in China's foreign affairs for the CCP political elite(s) is different from that for the rank and file of the CCP and China's people as a whole (Schelling, 1980: 53-118). Given domestic power overconcentration, if the 1st assumption implies that the personal interests are the national interests—as Louis XIV's 'L'État, c'est moi', then the 2nd assumption is plainly conveying a fact that absolute power corrupts absolutely—here, in our context, the term

'corrupt' is obviously not about its original sense of criminology but the arbitrary governance or to an extreme extent that is Ferdinand I's 'Fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus'. Say, if an absolute ruler possesses a Machtpolitik mindset and Weltpolitik aspiration, yet his reasoning faculty is sadly not operating in a Realpolitik track, then how can anyone logically speculate this person's intention, thereby allowing us to anticipate the foreign policy made by such a person? Is it not much easier to forecast the diplomatic maestro Bismarck's reasonable action than Kaiser Bill's gratuitous impulses, even though we are dealing with the same German Empire?

Parenthetically, this is exactly why structural realists are reluctant to involve the intrastate analysis, because you can never be sure how the leader/ruler's perception/arrière-pensée on a certain issue is, regardless of how much information you can have about this person's education background or life experience—as well, a ruler's temperament can be mercurial, and his knowledge and understanding of international politics can be biased or surreal. There is no exception in this China's case, the key is apparently lying in Xi's perception of the Ukraine affairs, and if there is someone who can have the privilege and channel to have a conversation with him on this salient foreign affair, then Wang Huning could be the one. Therefore, if an approach is to speculate China's foreign policy by studying its incumbent leadership, then these two figures should be the objects. This approach contains two serious infeasibilities: 1) as to the primary sources, because to study China's political system is ipso facto to study CCP's intraparty system and there is not even a scintilla of hope for a foreign scholar to access/probe into such high-level CCP's circle in order to harvest the data; 2) as to the secondary sources, the major outlet of this information is more often than not coming from those retired high-rank CCP officers' memoirs (Zhu Rongji, 2013)—the information in these documents are usually outdated and little useful for analysing the incumbent CCP leadership. The only valuable source for this subject is from those CCP defectors' reports; however, these figures' rank is relatively low, and their information usually relates to the special field of their past technocrat careers. Meanwhile, if it comes from a deserted high-rank CCP officer or a commercial subordinate of a red prince, then their reports are often very biased toward their personal/sectarian political interests.

Conclusion

The dialectic analyses between the two grand strategies through the inspection of the eight arguments show that the uncertainty of optimal outcome from selecting between the two grand strategies determines China's conservative attitude, remaining on the fence, and being neutral in the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

As further speculation on Beijing's future approach, in case it alters this neutrality and selects the 1st grand strategy approach, then the conflictual level between China and the United States will be rapidly escalated because, in this scenario, the time is on United States side which the advantage of shifting Russia's bloc belonging will not be lasting long. One reason is that Russia is a declining middle power due to its demographic structure, its bleak economy, as well as the incessant attrition warfare taking place in its invasion. Another reason is this coalition between Russia and China is fragile. Once China's ill-starred economic momentum starts slowing down by the following sanctions on its aid to Russia, the hopeless perception of the coalition's leading great power — China — might eventually lead to Moscow's about-face and defection towards the West for the sake of its own survival. In other words, just like Walz put in his 1979 seminal works chapter six, 'the greater success of one (i.e. among the two adversarial coalitions) in drawing members to it may tempt the other to risk preventive war, hoping for victory through surprise before disparities widen', the adoption of this 1st grand strategy will prompt China to initiate the conflict against the United States lest its advantage over the hegemon fading away with the passage of time.

Meanwhile, the 2nd grand strategy is indeed a more propitious path for China's continued rising (or, as Stephen Van Evera opines in his *Cause of War* that the ascending power should enjoy the long-term window and avert war against the declining adversary for now), due to contrast with the 1st grand strategy the time in this approach is on China's side, and it will open a window for the West to tackle Russia's invasion as well. Furthermore, even in the scenario that the following development between the China-United States bilateral relationship remains tense and there is little abatement from the United States foreign policy change in its hindrance imposing on China's internal economic build-up, the status quo between the two poles brought by the 2nd grand strategy will still largely benefit China's interests due to its bloodletting effects between the United States and Russia — from a systemic perspective that the declining of the adversary's capability is ipso facto the increasing of the own state's share in the system after all. Hence, if this Ukraine

case for China that Russia is a cat's paw, then the 2nd grand strategy regarding the United States for it is, as Napoleon's famous saying 'Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake'.

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Notes

¹ The term 'configuration' the researcher uses in this paper denotes the interactive relations among units in the system, which can be changed by a unit's unilateral behaviour towards other units (i.e. the state's foreign policy and its changing). Although the change of configuration by the unit's interaction cannot change the system's structure, it can significantly change the balance of power among the units in the system, e.g. China joining the United States Cold War bloc in 1972; the Russian Empire shifts its coalition to ally with the French Third Republic in 1892; or Lord Kobayakawa Hideaki changes sides from Ishida Mitsunari's Western Army to Tokugawa Ieyasu's Eastern Army during the decisive Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, etc. Apparently, the profound outcomes originated from these diplomatic and military manoeuvres have proven that a state is not just—to borrow Ulf Persson's term—a 'hapless piece of float-some tossed by the crested waves of structural effects'; rather, it has its agency; hence, its foreign policy approach choice under its grand strategy perception matters to its survival.

² "<...> and this (i.e. continue spending resources in Europe) is huge problem for United States, because Russia is not a serious threat to the United States, there is a serious threat in the system. There is a peer competitor out there – it is called China - and the United States should be focusing laser-like on containing China. We should actually be pivoting to Asia and pivoting out

of Europe.” – Mearsheimer J. J. Speech on “Booknotes+ Podcast: John Mearsheimer on Ukraine, International Relations, and the Military” (C-Span, 2022); (Mearsheimer, 2021).

³ By the end of the 1960s, the conflict between Russia and China reached its peak: the then Soviet Union’s political elite had been publicly planning to use its nuclear arsenal to completely destroy China. This relentless behaviour rendered Russia the only nation in human history besides the Mongols that had intended to destroy the Chinese nation via genocide. Hence, in Stephen M. Walt’s terminology, the threat of Russia perceived by Beijing contained all four elements, which are: aggregate power (i.e., in its military capability), geographic proximity, offensive capability and perceived aggressive intentions originating from political memories (Walt, 1990; Tianjue, 1335).

⁴ For instance, in the year 2021, the international trade scale is approximately equal to 34.5% of China’s GDP scale, net exports occupy 3.85% of that year’s China GDP – raw data from National Bureau of Statistics of China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2022).

⁵ The descendants of 1st generation CCP leaders in accordance to the Zunyi Conference on January 15th, 1935 (e.g. Mao Zedong, Zhang Wentian, Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, etc.) and later those CCP significant figures before the communist party took over China in 1949.

⁶ This angle or approach from the domestic politics perspective is also reflected by some defensive realist scholars’ views, such as Charles L. Glaser, who has put ‘motive’ as one of the three variables in investigating a state’s security policy’s possible choice (Glaser, 2010; Walt, 1990). Of course, the most blatant criticism of these domestic approaches from the structural realist school was coming from John J. Mearsheimer on Kenneth Waltz that ‘Thus, Waltz famously argues that his theory of international politics needs to be supplemented by a separate theory of foreign policy that can explain misguided state behaviour. However, that additional theory, which invariably emphasizes domestic political considerations, is not a structural realist theory’ (Mearsheimer, 2006). Indeed, the founder of offensive realist did admit that the foreign policy maker’s is one of the major sources of uncertainty in international relations that ‘Intention is in the head of the policy maker, and you can’t get inside someone’s head, and see what is he or she is thinking, it is impossible. Furthermore, even you think you can figure out what the state’s intention of today - October 15, 2020, you can’t tell me what they would be on October 15, 2025 or, 2030. So, intentions are ultimately unknowable, you can never know other state’s intention with the high degree of certainty’ (The University of Chicago, 2020).

Power seeking is the most certain strategy for states to maximise their chances of survival. However, because of this uncertainty, the structural effect dominates its units’ behaviour. Therefore, an optimal grand strategy for a state from an offensive perspective is to maximise its relative strength vis-à-vis its adversary through conducting external conquest/balance or internal buildup

⁷ ‘So the Cold War—Cold War number one was dangerous for sure, but it was not that dangerous because the focal point—the central front would have resulted in a conflict that was so horrible that was hard to imagine getting it started to begin with. Now let’s move to East Asia today—very different situation there is no central front. <...> Well, it is easy to image a war breaking out between the United States and China over those three pieces of real estate (i.e. Taiwan, Senkaku Islands, and South China Sea area) in large part because it would not involve a massive conflict involving large armies and thousands of nuclear weapons’ (Centre for Independent Studies, 2021).

⁸ Here, for the United States realist strategists, the logic to ally Russia to contain China in the 21st century is no different from the logic to ally China to contain the Soviet Union by the end of the 1960s—both calculations originated from the amoral balance of power principle. For them, the neoconservative U.S. foreign policy establishment’s democratization approach toward

Putin's kleptocratic regime is hardly different from the grave mistake made by Antiochus towards King Philip of Macedonia Kingdom during the Syrian War (192–188 BC). Because the United States realist strategists' perception of Russia's role in the USA-China hegemonic struggle is the same as that of King Philip's role in the Syrian War perceived by Hannibal two thousand years ago—'he (i.e. King Philip) can turn the scale of this war for whichever side he favours'. Regarding this historical case, see: 'Thus he (i.e. Antiochus III the Great) carried favour with the Macedonians and accused Philip before them of leaving unburied those who had fallen in his service. Until now Philip had been wavering and in doubt which side he should espouse, but when he heard of this he joined the Romans at once' (Appian, 1899).

⁹ Or, in a comparative politics sense you can call it Guillermo O' Donnell's 'bureaucratic authoritarian' plus II, so it is just different stages/types of pregnancy of authoritarianism (i.e. borrow Adam Przeworski's analogy), the essence of Russia regime has no change during its new Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin's governance but having a different administrative approach withal. Regarding 'bureaucratic authoritarian', (O' Donnell, 1973; Munck, 2007).

¹⁰ This sentence comes from Marshal Rodolfo Graziani's protest letter to Mussolini's pressure forcing him to conduct an offensive campaign against the British, because in the year 1940 his 10th Army just simply didn't have the sufficient equipment to fight against the Great British force in Egypt. See, Lyman R. *The Longest Siege: Tobruk – The Battle that Saved North Africa*. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 2009. In fact, the axiomatic relationship between a state's armament capability and its military effectiveness is the key reason that defines the one of the two goals of strategic bombing is to deprive of, or at least largely maim the adversary's industrial capacity thereby put the latter's military out of action (i.e. another one is demoralisation—of course, besides these two orthodox purpose, some cases in WWII which were directly targeting the enemy state's manpower or civil victimisation such as Dresden and Tokyo bombing were also adopted by the Allies, due to the munition usage were anti-personal incendiary instead of high explosive bomb that destroys the building). Regarding the strategic bombing cases during World War II, see: Bownes A. B. *Targeting Civilians in War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. Chapter iv, pp. 115-155.

¹¹ For China, the United States market is to it as Gaia is to Alcyoneus: the former is the latter's source of strength. Severe Chinese exports to the United States are like that immortal titan choosing a fight that takes place off the earth. The essence of the 2nd grand strategy for China is to gradually enlarge relative power vis-à-vis the United States in the long term. This grand strategy's prerequisite is the relative gains between the two poles are in China's favour—otherwise, what is the meaning of postponing the hegemonic conflict and buying time by abandoning a potential ally? The present-day scenario for Beijing is comparable to that of Pompey on the eve of the Battle of Pharsalus, or Brutus on the day before The Battle of Philippi; time is on its side, and it can sit on the sidelines when the United States is busying itself with its crusaders, waiting for the fruit—the increasing distribution of capability in the system—to be matured. Hence, aiding Russia is a self-defeating foreign policy and against the essential rationale of the 2nd grand strategy, which will bog China down into an economic conflict with the United States and eventually ruin its economic momentum.

¹² For instance, the two countries not only share the longest bilateral border length in the world—4,133 km but for Beijing, the closest distance from the China-Russia border to the Chinese capital is 1,200 km; however, if a military conflict is started from the ex-Soviet satellite state Mongolia, then this distance will be sharp shortened to mere 550 km through Zamiin-Uud—Erenhot—China's G208 highway. This means Beijing—the Great Power's own political centre, historic core well as the country's biggest ecumene is constantly under the threat of Russia's blitzkrieg threat, much less the CCP's leadership could be decapitated in case of nuclear usage by Russia—a high power-concentrated political system like the totalitarian China, the

'centre of gravity' is always its small group of political elites that situate at the top of the power structure. Furthermore, in China's case, whether the communication between this small group with the great power's vast military establishment is cut off or is simply neutralised, the military capability—especially the nuclear capability will be largely paralysed/crippled. Regarding China's nuclear 'NC3' system's—command, control, and communication—highly centralised and lack of delegation (Riqiang, 2002; Barlow, 1992; Clausewitz, 1918).

¹³ Present-day China's territory is shaped like a rooster, yet its shape wasn't like it before the 19th century. Instead, it looked like a begonia - should it not have lost Outer Manchuria (600,000 square kilometres, Treaty of Aigun, 1858; 400,000 square kilometres, Convention of Peking, 1860), the whole east areas of Lake Balkhash (440,000 square kilometres, Treaty of Tarbagatai, 1864), the east areas of Lake Zaysan (70,000 square kilometres, Treaty of Ili, 1881) and the whole Outer Mongolia (1,565,000 square kilometres, treaty of Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, 1945).

¹⁴ A plain fact regarding international trade's importance for the economic development momentum of China is that in the first five months of 2022, its trade surplus reached 276 billion US dollars, with exports rising 13.5% while imports gained 6.6%. The trade surplus with the US widened to 152 billion US dollars (i.e. it is 55% of China's total external surplus in the same period) – raw data from: General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China. Total value of import and export commodity countries (regions) in May 2022 (RMB).

¹⁵ This domestic politics affect the foreign policy diverting from its national interests is also the main theme in the seismic book *The Israel lobby and U.S. foreign policy* written by offensive realist John J. Mearsheimer and defensive realist Stephen M. Walt. See: Mearsheimer J. J. and Walt S. M. *The Israel lobby and U.S. foreign policy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. & "<...> this is an exception to standard realist behavior and our argument in the book and elsewhere is when domestic politics intrudes too heavily into a state's calculations and into the making of foreign policy, there is some considerable danger you will end up doing things that are not in your national interests' (UC Berkeley Events, 2007).

¹⁶ One more significant evidence about the Red Princes' weight in Beijing's foreign policymaking is that the first requirement in the "List of U.S. Wrongdoing that Must Stop" presented by Beijing to the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman during her two days visit in Tianjin 2021 was 'to unconditionally revoke visa restrictions on members of the Communist Party of China and their family members' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 2021).

¹⁷ For instance, there is a special feature of China's political system which is rather different to other states' setting and often be neglected by most of Western political scholars — the military branch. The one who is charging the military branch and possesses the title of "Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Communist Party of China" is the one who rules the CCP and the state as well — regardless who is the President of the People's Republic of China in the same time, so to speak.

Appendix 01: The conceptual framework of research

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