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## **The War in Ukraine and the Growing North-South Divide: A European Union Perspective**

*By Alice Ekman*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*In Europe, a strong consensus exists around the condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and it was expected that such consensus would naturally broaden globally. In fact, this is not the case. A North-South divide has emerged on this issue, partly due to the position of China, which has consolidated its partnership with Russia, and a clear anti-West strategy is apparent.*

### **COMMENTARY**

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war is currently the very top concern of the European Union (EU) and individual EU member states. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, EU member states have adopted several packages of energy and technological sanctions against it, delivered weapons to Ukrainian military personnel, and made numerous calls on Russia to cease its military aggression.

Despite these, Russia has not stopped its invasion although there have been significant casualties on both sides. According to US estimates in November 2022, about 40,000 civilians have been killed in Ukraine, and more than 100,000 Russian soldiers have been killed or injured.

On the contrary, Russia escalated the conflict by "partially" mobilizing 300,000 reservists in September, issuing several threats to use weapons of mass destruction (including the use of nuclear weapons), and organizing, in late September 2022, illegal "referenda", in which people "voted" to separate from Ukraine and join Russia, in the parts of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine that it occupied at that time.

According to Russia, these “referenda” overwhelmingly approved its annexation of the territories. The EU strongly condemned such unilateral actions in a declaration delivered by Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

### **Conflict Theatres Intertwined: From Europe to the Indo-Pacific**

The war in Ukraine has led to renewed cooperation and solidarity between EU members and several Indo-Pacific partners such as Japan and Australia. These partners also swiftly condemned Russia’s aggression, adopted sanctions against it, and provided military and/or humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Many Indo-Pacific partners see this solidarity as important given the urgency of the crisis in Europe, but also as an instinctive move to uphold the Charter of the United Nations and the associated international rules-based order.

Many states are inclined to see conflict theatres in Europe and the Indo-Pacific regions as increasingly intertwined, with countries located far from Ukraine ready to take a clear position on the conflict. At the same time, there are divergences among the Indo-Pacific group. India, for example, adopted a distinctive position and was reluctant to hold Moscow responsible for the war besides reconsidering its significant security and energy cooperation with Russia.

Most of all, the European Union and its member states had expected China to clarify its position on the issue. Even if the hope – as expressed in March 2022 by Josep Borrell – that China could act as a “mediator” in the crisis was quickly dismissed, expectations that Beijing would at least condemn Russia’s invasion remained in the air.

But the EU-China Summit of 1 April 2022, described by Borrell as a “dialogue of the deaf”, dispelled such expectations, as was also the case with exchanges between China and EU member states in the following months. The hope and expectation that the weight of EU-China trade – China became the EU’s biggest trading partner in 2021 – and the shadow of secondary sanctions would encourage Beijing to at least distance itself from Russia have so far proved to be largely misplaced.

### **China-Russia: A Resistant Relationship**

The relationship between China and Russia remains closely monitored in Europe. Long seen as a simple “marriage of convenience”, the rapprochement between the two countries has in fact been consolidated by much more than pragmatic energy cooperation. There is also a shared resentment against the US, NATO and the ‘West’ in general terms.

The signing on 4 February 2022 of a Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the margins of the Winter Olympics opening ceremony, showed that the rapprochement had been planned by the two governments in a strategic and detailed manner. Although China and Russia are not treaty allies, the joint statement unmistakably formalised a China-Russia security partnership.

The document reaffirmed their strong mutual support for their respective core

interests. Of particular importance to China was that, in a unilateral commitment within the Joint Statement, Russia reaffirmed its support for the One-China principle, Taiwan's status as an inalienable part of China, and Russia's opposition to any form of independence for Taiwan. Most of all, the length and structure of the document, which was issued only a few weeks before the start of the war in Ukraine, strongly indicated that the bilateral relationship had consolidated rapidly in recent years and is based on a shared post-Western view of world order.

The stresses associated with the war on Ukraine have exposed significant imbalances between the two countries; in particular, they have reinforced Russia's dependency on China. These imbalances can be seen on the economic front – China is the second largest economy in the world, Russia ranks 11th – and increasingly, across the diplomatic, technological, and military fields.

At the same time, the current global divide over sanctions on Russia may lead to the consolidation of normative rapprochement between China, Russia, and members of their 'circle of friends'. In practical terms, this could see their concerted efforts to converge their version of norms for an internet governance regime, norms for financial and payment systems, and norms regulating digital currency and other tools that may facilitate the circumvention of sanctions.

The Chinese authorities are likely to continue seeking more autonomy from the West regarding technological hardware and software, in line with China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) and the emphasis on self-reliance in strategic sectors.

All things considered, the China-Russia rapprochement is likely, in broad terms, to continue to consolidate in the coming years, as it is driven by a strong shared resentment against the West as well as strong geopolitical ambitions to restructure global governance and norms for a post-Western world order. The coalition-building efforts on both sides – 'Western-led' or 'China-Russia led' – are diametrically opposed because they wish to gather countries around radically different types of political systems, development models, and ideals.

### **Different Hierarchies of Priority**

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in September 2022 in Uzbekistan, and the G20 and APEC Summits in Indonesia and Thailand respectively in November 2022 have not only underlined diverging views of the war in Ukraine, but also diverging hierarchies of priorities for the other prominent issues on the international agenda.

Some countries, including all EU member states, consider that the war in Ukraine should be, and should remain, at the top of the bilateral and multilateral agendas, whereas others, including China and several Southeast Asian countries, consider that it should not monopolise international discussions. This generates a new form of multilateral cacophony that is now leading to tensions at the onset of preparations for summits and other major international meetings – tensions on the shaping of agendas and participants' lists – through to the conclusion and difficulty arriving at joint and meaningful statements.

More recently, as the sanctions are being felt globally and concerns on energy prices

and food security intensify, new sets of divergences are emerging between countries. For example, some countries, mainly from the emerging/developing world, argue in substance that the war in Ukraine is not their war and that the West is making the rest of the world pay for the consequences of their war and sanctions.

A deeper North-South divide is growing not only around the war in Ukraine but also around many other issues and crises, including Hong Kong, Xinjiang (polarisation of votes at the UN Human Rights Council) and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU, individual EU member states and other countries perceived as 'Western' have faced criticisms about the perceived lack of solidarity in the management of the pandemic globally and the implementation of the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) facility, which is a world-wide initiative aimed at equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines.

From the perspective of the EU, which is collectively the biggest donor of international aid in the world, providing over 50 billion Euros a year to help overcome poverty and advance global development, and which contributed 500 million Euros to the COVAX facility, these criticisms are seen as unfair and part of a broader "battle of narratives" in which various countries, including Russia and China, are eager in any situation to encourage the emergence of a negative and accusative image of the West using distorted facts, fake news and disinformation campaigns. In this context, the EU is stepping up its engagement and capacity to respond to foreign information manipulation and interference.

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