

## Patience wears thin as Ukraine adopts a harder line on China

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Over the past year, Ukraine has redefined its approach to China. This shift reflects the deepening China–Russia relationship, China’s critical role in sustaining Russia’s war effort, and its propaganda support for Moscow in the Global South. One manifestation of this change was Kyiv’s disclosure of Chinese industrial espionage in Ukraine and the involvement of Chinese mercenaries fighting on the Russian side. These moves contrast with Ukraine’s earlier, more cautious stance, which sought to engage Beijing in mediating between Ukraine and Russia and, in particular, to deter it from supporting Russia. They point to a loss of hope that maintaining stable relations with China would bring tangible benefits and mark a shift in Kyiv’s policy. An important context was Donald Trump’s return to power in the United States. Ukrainian officials sought to persuade Washington that there is a shared threat requiring a coordinated response. They highlighted China–Russia cooperation and linked Russia’s aggressive actions in Europe to China’s ambitions towards Taiwan.

Since the outset of the Russian invasion, Beijing has not changed its position. It continues to provide diplomatic and material support to the pro-Chinese and anti-Western regime in the Kremlin. China has avoided making any clear declarations to Kyiv and has relied on claims of neutrality. The main challenge for Chinese diplomacy is to reconcile its support for Russia with its stated commitment to the independence and territorial integrity of UN member states, including Ukraine. This narrative remains an important element of Beijing’s competition for leadership in the Global South.

### Kyiv’s hopes...

Since Volodymyr Zelensky came to power in 2019, he has sought a ‘fresh start’ in relations with Beijing. This was driven by a weakening of cooperation following Kyiv’s political turn towards the West after the so-called Revolution of Dignity.<sup>1</sup> The new political elites viewed cooperation with China as a third significant direction of foreign policy, alongside integration with the West and efforts to counter Russia. They hoped this would attract investment and reduce the foreign trade deficit.

<sup>1</sup> J. Jakóbowski, K. Nieczypor, ‘Under the radar of big politics: cooperation between China and Ukraine’, *OSW Commentary*, no. 395, 2 June 2021, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

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At the start of the full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian president called for “such an influential state as China to join the common position of the world on Russia’s war against Ukraine”. He also expected Beijing to refrain from assisting the invader and saw potential for it to act as a mediator capable of influencing the Kremlin.<sup>2</sup> Efforts to engage China also drew on the ‘One China’ policy, which Kyiv sought to use as an argument for Beijing’s practical support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Appeals for help in securing the return of around 20,000 Ukrainian children abducted by Russia from occupied territories, as well as in restraining Moscow’s military activity near the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, served both as a test of China’s intentions and an attempt to involve it in Kyiv’s diplomatic efforts. China’s engagement on these issues would have complicated its relations with Moscow and benefited Ukraine, while refusal would have contradicted the values China claims to uphold.

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Zelensky sought to open a channel of communication with the Chinese leader, hoping he could personally persuade him to accept his position. However, the only phone call between the two leaders since 2022 took place as late as April 2023,<sup>3</sup> and produced no tangible results. Despite growing mistrust, efforts to engage China continued, including by Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba during his visit to Guangzhou in July 2024.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, from the first months of the war, officials at lower political levels in Kyiv spoke publicly about Beijing’s involvement in financing Russia’s war machine. This included increased purchases of goods, particularly energy resources (in 2025, around 27% of Russian exports went to China),<sup>5</sup> as well as the dissemination of pro-Russian narratives. Oleksandr Merezhko, chair of the Verkhovna Rada’s Foreign Affairs Committee from the ruling Servant of the People party, along with an inter-factional group he established, argued that Kyiv should stop harbouring illusions about Beijing.<sup>6</sup> They advocated building closer ties with Taiwan, including the opening of a Taipei representative office in Ukraine. However, the leadership of the Verkhovna Rada did not register the group, and calls to toughen Ukraine’s approach towards Beijing did not gain acceptance within the presidential administration at that time.

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### ...and Beijing’s manoeuvres

China has traditionally viewed Ukraine as part of Russia’s sphere of influence. In recent years, however, Beijing has recognised opportunities for cooperation, particularly in the mining and agricultural sectors. As China moved to diversify its supply chains and reduce reliance on Australia and Brazil, it began importing iron ore from Ukraine, at times accounting for around half of Ukraine’s total iron ore exports in 2020 and 2021. In agriculture, China was the largest importer of Ukrainian products from 2019 until the outbreak of the full-scale war. This growing demand drove a rapid expansion

<sup>2</sup> ‘It is important that Switzerland supports Ukraine – Volodymyr Zelenskyy during a conversation with the university community’, President of Ukraine, 30 September 2022, [president.gov.ua](http://president.gov.ua).

<sup>3</sup> ‘President of Ukraine had a phone call with the President of the People’s Republic of China’, President of Ukraine, 26 April 2023, [president.gov.ua](http://president.gov.ua).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Dmytro Kuleba: a just peace in Ukraine is in China’s strategic interests’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 24 July 2024, [mfa.gov.ua](http://mfa.gov.ua).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Институт Гайдара: Китай сохраняет позицию крупнейшего партнера России’, ТАСС, 5 March 2026, [tass.ru](http://tass.ru).

<sup>6</sup> М. Сировой, Д. Гриниченко, ‘Голова комітету Ради про розмову Зеленський-Сі: Подивимось, чи припинить Китай підтримку РФ’, LIGA.net, 26 April 2023, [news.liga.net](http://news.liga.net).

in economic ties before the war, making China Ukraine's main trading partner. At the same time, Beijing sought access to Ukrainian military technology, as illustrated by its attempted acquisition of a strategic aircraft engine manufacturer, a deal that was ultimately blocked under pressure from the United States.<sup>7</sup>

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alliance with Russia.<sup>8</sup> China's primary strategic objective in Europe is to bring about a breakdown of the transatlantic community. An EU isolated from the United States, susceptible to Russian military pressure and internally divided would remain open to China's economic penetration and neutralised as a US ally in a potential conflict over Taiwan. For these reasons, the failure of the Kremlin's plans for a rapid military operation has not significantly altered Beijing's strategic calculations, and it continues openly to support the creation of a 'new security architecture in Europe' with a prominent role for Russia.

At the same time, the Global South constitutes a key arena for China's rivalry with the West, led by the United States. Beijing seeks to establish leadership among these states in order to secure political support in its confrontation with Washington, including votes within the UN system. The region also offers significant opportunities for China's economic expansion, particularly as a source of critical raw materials. At the ideological level, the Communist Party of China presents China to countries in the Global South as a counterweight to a neo-colonial Global North that exploits them. It also promotes an authoritarian model of development as an alternative to liberal democracy. However, Beijing faces competition for influence not only from India, but also from a coalition of smaller states, including Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa, which pursue their own agendas.

Given all this, China views Ukraine's efforts to pursue a more active policy in the Global South, aimed at building support for its position on the war with Russia, as a threat. As a result, Beijing's relations with Kyiv are shaped by a balancing strategy across three fronts: resisting Western pressure to push Moscow towards meaningful peace negotiations; providing tangible economic support to Putin's regime through trade and political cooperation; and maintaining an appearance of neutrality in order to preserve its standing in the Global South. The region places strong emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity, which constrains Beijing's ability to openly support Russia's war of territorial conquest. Since the outset of the war, the Chinese leadership has therefore sought to maintain the impression that Russia is acting independently in Ukraine. This reflects the need to preserve Putin's domestic standing, thereby allowing the Kremlin to present itself as an equal partner rather than a subordinate to China, as well as Beijing's reluctance to frame the war as part of its broader rivalry with the United States. China aims to avoid a situation in which the conflict is widely perceived as a proxy war between itself and the West.

As a result, China must manoeuvre between the need to maintain stable relations with Kyiv and to preserve the impression that it is actively seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict, and the need to avoid actions that would cast Moscow in an unfavourable light or compel it to make concessions that Putin is not prepared to accept.

<sup>7</sup> P. Żochowski, A. Wilk, J. Jakóbcowski, 'Chiny czy USA: ukraińskie dylematy wokół przyszłości Motor Sicz', OSW, 4 September 2019, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>8</sup> M. Bogusz, J. Jakóbcowski, W. Rodkiewicz, *The Beijing-Moscow axis. The foundations of an asymmetric alliance*, OSW, Warsaw 2021, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

## Diverging visions of peace

Despite Ukrainian diplomacy highlighting issues that could enable China to present itself as a global power committed to protecting human rights or to reducing the global risk of nuclear conflict, Kyiv has not seen any constructive Chinese engagement in efforts to end the war. Over time, disagreements with China over the terms of a potential peace plan, as well as competition for the support of Global South states in shaping perceptions of the Russia–Ukraine war, have become increasingly apparent.

In November 2022, Kyiv presented its own framework for ending the conflict, known as the Peace Formula. Its key elements included a ceasefire, the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory, and the restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity.<sup>9</sup> The plan also called for accountability for war crimes, along with measures to ensure nuclear safety and stabilise food exports. These proposals, grounded in the UN Charter, were intended to secure broad international support, including from the Global South, and to demonstrate that a majority of states worldwide backed Ukraine’s vision for ending the war.

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This vision clearly conflicted with Beijing’s objectives. China’s 2023 document, titled *China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*, consisted of 12 points but remained sufficiently vague to allow Beijing to project the image of a ‘neutral mediator’.<sup>10</sup> In practice, it was not a roadmap to peace but rather a political manifesto aimed at persuading the Global South that Beijing represents a ‘voice of reason’ in contrast to a ‘war-mongering’ West. It also sought to deflect further Western pressure on Chinese leaders to influence Putin and thereby avoid harming Moscow.

The same objectives shaped China’s actions in May 2024, when, together with Brazil, it presented a so-called peace plan known as the Six-Point Consensus.<sup>11</sup> The proposal called for de-escalation, including a halt to the expansion of the frontline, and for diplomatic dialogue on terms acceptable to both sides. It also included provisions for humanitarian assistance and a ban on the use of weapons of mass destruction, while opposing unilateral sanctions on Russia. However, it omitted key issues such as Ukraine’s territorial integrity and the Russian occupation, which are central to the concept promoted by Kyiv, and offered no concrete measures beyond general calls to end the war.

Ukrainians responded critically to both Chinese initiatives. The twelve-point proposal, announced on the first anniversary of the Russian invasion, was widely seen as an attempt to undermine Ukraine’s draft UN resolution condemning Russian aggression. The China–Brazil plan, presented during preparations for the summit on Ukraine’s Peace Formula in Bürgenstock, Switzerland, was viewed in similar terms.<sup>12</sup> China’s efforts to discourage leaders from the Global South from attending the summit were interpreted in Kyiv as an attempt to derail its vision of a just end to the war and marked a turning point in its approach to Beijing. President Zelensky described the Brazil–China proposal as ‘destructive’ and accused both countries of acting in Russia’s interest.<sup>13</sup> Visits to Kyiv by China’s Special Represent-

<sup>9</sup> ‘Ukraine has always been a leader in peacemaking efforts; if Russia wants to end this war, let it prove this with actions – speech by the President of Ukraine at the G20 Summit’, President of Ukraine, 15 November 2022, [president.gov.ua](https://www.president.gov.ua).

<sup>10</sup> See M. Bogusz, K. Niecypor, ‘China’s diplomatic game over the ‘peace plan’’, OSW, 24 February 2023, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Common Understandings Between China and Brazil on Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 23 May 2024, [fmprc.gov.cn](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn).

<sup>12</sup> K. Niecypor, ‘Pax Ukrainica. Ukraine’s hopes and expectations ahead of the summit in Switzerland’, *OSW Commentary*, no. 601, 4 June 2024, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>13</sup> ‘Ukraine’s Zelenskiy dismisses ‘destructive’ China-Brazil peace initiative’, Reuters, 12 September 2024, [reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com).

ative for Eurasian Affairs, Li Hui, in May 2023 and March 2024 were also received coolly, with many Ukrainians regarding them largely as a façade.<sup>14</sup>

These divergences have strained Ukraine–China relations. Beijing has grown increasingly frustrated by Kyiv’s diplomacy in the Global South. It sees the region as a key

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arena in its rivalry with the West and is concerned that a widely shared condemnation of the Russian invasion could allow Washington and other Western governments to regain influence lost after the Cold War. From China’s perspective, a turning point appears to have been the Bürgenstock summit in 2024. Beijing was concerned about the emergence of a new forum for Global South countries that excluded China while operating alongside Western partners. Unlike the UN system, this format would leave China with little or no influence. At the same time, bringing Brazil into the initiative aimed to show that Beijing was not isolated in its stance. In this context, supporting Moscow diplomatically was not the primary objective. Kyiv, meanwhile, became increasingly disillusioned with cooperation with China. It lost hope of persuading Beijing to adopt genuine neutrality. China’s diplomatic efforts, presented as neutral or mediatory, undermined the international coalition against Russian aggression. In Kyiv’s view, Beijing was using the war instrumentally to strengthen its position in the global balance of power, at Ukraine’s expense.

## A policy shift in Kyiv

China’s efforts to undermine Ukrainian and Western attempts to end the war, along with new evidence of Chinese support for Russia, prompted a policy shift in Kyiv. From spring 2025, the Ukrainian government increasingly portrayed China as aligned with Moscow and began publicising instances of Chinese assistance. In April, it presented Chinese nationals captured while fighting on the Russian side in the Donetsk region.<sup>15</sup> President Zelensky stated that at least 155 Chinese citizens were involved in the conflict on the side of the invader. He said Russia had recruited them via social media with Beijing’s tacit consent.

A few days later, Kyiv openly accused Beijing for the first time of providing direct military assistance to Moscow. Zelensky revealed that China was supplying the occupying forces with weapons, explosives, as well as machine tools and components intended for the defence industry, and that Chinese nationals were involved in their production on Russian territory.<sup>16</sup> He also accused Beijing of halting exports of widely used DJI Mavic drones to Ukraine and Western countries, while continuing their delivery to Moscow.

Ukrainian drone manufacturers, which have in practice imported components from China since the beginning of the war, further claim that Chinese companies, with state approval, prioritise Russian clients and even export entire production lines to Russia.<sup>17</sup> In April 2025, Ukraine decided for the first time to impose sanctions on Chinese entities. This process has continued, with dozens of companies targeted by restrictions since then. The list includes firms involved in the transfer of dual-use technologies, the production of Iskander missiles, and the supply of drone components.

<sup>14</sup> M. Bogusz, W. Rodkiewicz, T. Iwański, ‘Li Hui’s second trip: China’s pretence at mediation in Ukraine’, OSW, 14 March 2024, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>15</sup> В. Горьова, ‘ЗСУ взяли в полон двох громадян Китаю, які воювали в складі російської армії — Зеленський’, NV, 8 April 2025, [nv.ua](https://nv.ua).

<sup>16</sup> ‘Зеленський: Україна має інформацію, що Китай постачає Росії порох і артилерію’, Радіо Свобода, 17 April 2025, [radiosvoboda.org](https://radiosvoboda.org).

<sup>17</sup> ‘Russia, Ukraine and the race for Chinese drone components’, Financial Times, 21 January 2026, [ft.com](https://ft.com).

Kyiv's increasingly hard line towards Beijing was further underscored in July, when Ukraine's Security Service detained two Chinese nationals suspected of attempting to smuggle documentation related to the RK-360MC 'Neptune' missile system out of the country.<sup>18</sup> The decision to make the case public suggests that Kyiv now views Beijing as part of the problem rather than a potential solution, and that Ukraine stands to gain more from openly criticising China than from seeking to limit its influence over the invader. In August, President Zelensky ruled out China as a potential security guarantor for Ukraine, citing a lack of trust stemming from Beijing's passive stance during Russia's invasions in 2014 and 2022. He also accused China of cooperating with Moscow on satellite reconnaissance used to carry out attacks, including against energy infrastructure. Overall, Kyiv appears to have abandoned the view that Beijing can be persuaded to take meaningful steps to curb the Russian invasion.

An important factor behind the shift in Ukraine's policy towards China was Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election. During his campaign, Trump referred to China as the main ad-

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versary and pledged to bring a swift end to the war between Russia and Ukraine. Kyiv expected that revealing further evidence of alignment between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin would temper expectations within Trump's camp and administration regarding the possibility of loosening ties between Russia and China. According to this logic, supporting Ukraine would serve Washington's interests, as weakening Beijing's key partner would not only reduce Russia's role in the European theatre but also constrain China's ambitions in the Pacific, including towards Taiwan. By imposing sanctions on Chinese companies and consistently exposing China's support for Moscow, Kyiv has emphasised the link between the European and Pacific theatres, seeking to sustain US engagement in the former.

The fact that Kyiv's more assertive approach towards China is also aimed at Washington is underscored by the agreement between Ukraine and the United States of 30 April 2025.<sup>19</sup> The document is intended to secure a key role for the United States in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. Kyiv has excluded from this process countries that support Russia, including China, which had previously expressed readiness to participate.<sup>20</sup> This decision aligns with the logic of the Trump administration: since Washington has borne the greatest burden of supporting Ukraine, Beijing should not benefit from the reconstruction effort.

China is largely ignoring Kyiv's actions. Ukrainian reports on Beijing's support for Moscow have not significantly altered the European Union's cautious approach or led to increased pressure on China. In its relations with Washington, Beijing is pursuing its own diplomatic strategy and does not believe that Kyiv can influence how the current US administration views the war in a way that would harm Chinese interests. Moreover, Trump's interventionist policies have created new lines of division in the Global South. As a result, following his election victory, Beijing has ceased even to maintain the appearance of efforts towards a peaceful resolution to the war in Ukraine. At the same time, it avoids openly hostile steps towards Kyiv so as not to alienate those segments of global public opinion that sympathise with Ukraine.

<sup>18</sup> 'SSU detains Chinese spies who collected secret technologies of Ukraine's Neptune missiles production', Security Service of Ukraine, 9 July 2025, [ssu.gov.ua](https://ssu.gov.ua).

<sup>19</sup> M. Jędrzyak, S. Matuszak, 'The Ukraine-US agreement on minerals', OSW, 6 May 2025, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>20</sup> 'Країни, які допомагали РФ, точно не братимуть участі у відбудові України – Зеленський', Interfax-Ukraine, 3 May 2025, [interfax.com.ua](https://interfax.com.ua).

## Prospects

From Kyiv's perspective, attempts to involve Beijing in efforts to achieve peace, particularly by invoking respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity in a manner comparable to the One China policy, have produced the opposite of the intended effect. As a result, the shift towards a more confrontational policy on China appears likely to be lasting. This approach will focus on consistently highlighting China's cooperation with Moscow and expanding sanctions against Chinese businesses cooperating with Russia. At the same time, developments in China–US relations will remain an important context. As long as Washington is not prepared to increase pressure on Beijing over its cooperation with Moscow, and to strengthen support for Kyiv, Ukraine will seek to keep channels of dialogue with the Chinese leadership open. China remains Ukraine's main trading partner, with trade volume exceeding \$21 billion and accounting for around 16.8% of its foreign trade, with a significant imbalance in favour of imports.<sup>21</sup>

However, Kyiv's confrontational policy has its limits. The Ukrainian government does not wish to give Beijing grounds to provide more open and direct support to the Kremlin or to cut Ukraine off from supplies of Chinese components. This is particularly relevant for components used in FPV drones, which are mass-produced in China and purchased by Ukrainian companies either directly or through intermediaries. Beijing appears to tolerate this practice, but retains the ability to halt it. In this context, the December 2025 visit to Beijing by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergiy Kyslytsya, now First Deputy Head of the Presidential Office, which focused on trade, international cooperation, and the peace process, is significant. So too is the meeting between Foreign Ministers Andrii Sybiha and Wang Yi during the Munich Security Conference in February this year, after which assistance for Ukraine's energy sector was announced.<sup>22</sup>

As part of its policy towards Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine China will continue to pursue two main objectives, regardless of its bilateral relations with Kyiv. The first is to maintain a Russia-friendly regime capable of tying down the West militarily and politically in Europe while fuelling tensions in transatlantic relations. This is reflected in deepening economic and political cooperation, as well as record trade volumes. China has become a key source of economic support for Russia, significantly increasing imports of Russian oil, gas, and coal and providing Moscow with much-needed revenue in the face of Western sanctions. This is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Actions by the Trump administration have further reduced the likelihood of a military defeat for the Kremlin while weakening US pressure on Beijing over its support for Moscow.

Beijing's second objective has been to exploit the diplomatic opportunities created by the polarisation between the Global North and the Global South following the war in Ukraine, using this divide to build a loose coalition of countries opposed to the West. Ukraine's direct outreach to countries in the Global South and its attempts to establish independent channels of dialogue were seen as a challenge to China's leadership ambitions. The situation shifted with Trump's return to the White House. His policies, together with the earlier war in Gaza, intensified tensions on multiple fronts and further alienated much of the Global South from the United States. This enabled Beijing to regain confidence in its relations with these countries and made it easier to counter Kyiv's efforts to secure their support.

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<sup>21</sup> Imports from China in 2025 stood at \$19.2 billion – see 'За 12 місяців 2025 року товарообіг України склав \$125,1 млрд', State Customs Service of Ukraine, 12 January 2026, [customs.gov.ua](https://customs.gov.ua). Exports from Ukraine in 2025 stood at \$1.81 billion – see 'Як змінився український експорт товарів за 12 місяців 2025 року', Diia Biznes, 3 February 2026, [business.diia.gov.ua](https://business.diia.gov.ua).

<sup>22</sup> 'Andrii Sybiha held bilateral talks with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Munich', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 13 February 2026, [mfa.gov.ua](https://mfa.gov.ua).

As a result, unless the policy of the incumbent US administration changes significantly, China is likely to continue supporting Russia, undermining Ukraine's attempts to build support in the Global South and disregarding appeals from Western leaders to exert meaningful pressure on the Kremlin. In this context, Beijing treats its bilateral relationship with Kyiv as a secondary concern.