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China Adapts Policy in Response to Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine

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China perceives the Russian aggression against Ukraine as an expression of resistance to the U.S. and NATO hegemony and an important element of building a new international order that marginalises the West. Based on this, China is strengthening strategic cooperation with Russia, striving to weaken the international position of the U.S., the EU, and their partners, while testing reactions to a possible escalation of Chinese actions towards Taiwan, for example. President Xi Jinping expressed this policy course during his March visit to Russia. At the same time, China is trying to gain support from the countries of the Global South. This approach means a continuation of China's assertive policy towards the European Union, among others.

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The Russian aggression against Ukraine took place at a time when the attention of the Chinese authorities was focused on internal matters. At the beginning of 2022, the priority for them was on the preparations for the 20th Communist Party Congress¹ and the election of party leaders, including the confirmation of Xi Jinping's third term as general secretary. Structural problems deepened and the outlook for the Chinese economy turned negative.

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Population statistics showed that fewer and fewer Chinese are being born (the authorities officially admitted that last year, the population of China decreased for the first time in 60 years), consumption fell (retail sales fell in 2022 by 0.2% year on year), and the overall debt of public institutions, companies, and

households remained high, reaching the equivalent of 295% of GDP at the end of the year. A crisis in the real estate sector (responsible for about 30% of China's GDP) and the financial sector also were deepening. The problems were exacerbated by the "zero COVID" policy, which was less and less effective (especially with the weak Chinese vaccines and the emergence of new variants of the virus), and the political importance of controlling the public and mobilising the party apparatus around the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) leadership was growing.

By early 2022, China's foreign policy priority was controlled competition with the U.S. The Chinese authorities sought to calm relations with the U.S., inflamed in the Trump years, after Joe Biden took over the presidency. They had hoped for time to counteract the effects of the U.S. sanctions from 2021 (including a ban on investing in companies connected to China's armed forces), as well as to try to limit U.S. activity in the Indo-Pacific, which increased with the creation of the U.S.-UK-Australian defence cooperation format (AUKUS) in 2021.²

China emphasised its readiness to renew relations with the European Union in the hope of, among other things, increasing Chinese exports to the EU in connection with the rebuilding of European economies after the coronavirus pandemic. China also wanted to use the opportunity to slow or reduce the European Commission's implementation of a number of legal instruments aimed at Chinese interests.³ However, at the beginning of 2022, bilateral relations were at an impasse due to the mutual imposition of sanctions at the beginning of 2021, Chinese coercion against Lithuanian and EU companies in December 2021, and other conflicts.⁴ The Chinese authorities argued for the legitimacy of the EU maintaining "independence" and strengthening its "strategic autonomy", which in effect meant giving up close cooperation with the U.S. They referred to plans backed by the French and, to some extent, also by German diplomacy towards these aims. These connections were part of China's overarching policy towards the EU of counteracting the intensification of transatlantic cooperation. This also applied to the security sphere, with greater attention paid by NATO to the situation in Asia or the new technologies sector.⁵ In this context, China's relations with the new German government led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, which formed in January 2022 and took a sceptical approach to U.S. policy towards China,⁶ were of particular importance.

¹ M. Przychodniak, "20th Congress of the CPC Witnesses Xi Jinping's Domination and Puts Emphasis on China's Security," *PISM Bulletin*, 25 October 2022, www.pism.pl.

² M. Piotrowski, "AUKUS—Australia, UK and the U.S. Strengthen Defence Cooperation," *PISM Bulletin*, 21 September 2021, www.pism.pl.

³ S. Zaręba, "The EU Search for a Response to External Economic Pressure," *PISM Bulletin*, 6 April 2022, www.pism.pl.

⁴ M. Przychodniak, "Regression and Pro-Russia Rhetoric: China's reaction to Lithuania's Change of Policy," *PISM Bulletin*, 16 November 2021, www.pism.pl.

⁵ P. Markiewicz, "Prospects for EU-U.S. Tech Cooperation," *PISM Bulletin*, 30 August 2021, www.pism.pl.

⁶ The new German government continued the policy of engagement with China, cautiously perceiving the reduction of dependencies, mainly because of its importance to the German economy.

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In early February 2022, during the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing, Vladimir Putin paid an official visit to China.⁷ At that time, the leaders of the two countries signed a declaration on “international relations entering a new era and global sustainable development”.⁸ It contained mutual support for Chinese interests in the Indo-Pacific—including the takeover of Taiwan—and Russian security demands in Europe.⁹ The document refers to the Sino-Russian vision of a new international order. In practice, its main element is to undermine the key role of the U.S. and its European and Asian partners in the world order, as well as minimise Western values, including respect for international law and democratic standards. Russia and China emphasised the positive nature of cooperation with them for partners in Africa, the Middle East, and South America, as opposed to siding with American “hegemony”.

China Adapts Its Position

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 did not come as a complete surprise to China.¹⁰ In the political dimension, China upheld the February 2022 declaration as the basis of Sino-Russian relations and justified Russia’s actions in connection with its view of a threat to its security. However, China’s policy towards Russia’s aggression against Ukraine became nuanced over time, adapting it to the changing international situation and trying to use the Chinese support for Russia (as declared in February) to promote its own interests. However, it had problems quickly adapting to these changes, including to events on the military front in Ukraine, as a result of the CPC’s rigid decision-making hierarchy, among others. In the first days of the war, there was also communication chaos concerning, for example, Chinese living in Ukraine and their evacuation (which probably led to some casualties). There was also surprise within the Chinese leadership with Russia’s failure to achieve its main military goals, and above all with the decisive reaction of the U.S., the EU, and their partners, including Japan, Australia, and Singapore. Gradually, it became clear to the Chinese authorities that their attitude to the Russian aggression was having a decisive influence not only on their relations with Russia but also on their rivalry with the U.S., the development of relations with the EU, and relations with developing countries.

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In April 2022, Chairman Xi presented China’s official position on the “situation in Ukraine”, which was later repeated by then Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi.¹¹ They proposed a resumption of peace talks between Russia and Ukraine (which broke down after the discovery of the Russian crimes in Bucha), respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries in the spirit of the UN Charter (without direct reference to Ukraine), rejection of a “Cold War mentality” (a notion addressed to the countries of the Global South presenting the war as caused by the U.S. and NATO, portrayed as a relic of the past), and referred to their opposition to sanctions. They also expressed concern for maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific. The arguments included in the Chinese position were meant to present China as making a constructive commitment to peace and stabilisation of the

⁷ J. Szczudlik, “Xi-Putin Meeting—China’s Open Support for Russia’s Policy Objectives,” *PISM Spotlight*, 7 February 2022, www.pism.pl.

⁸ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and People’s Republic of China on International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” Kremlin, 4 February 2022, www.en.kremlin.ru.

⁹ A. Legucka, “Russia Demands Security Guarantees from the U.S. and NATO,” *PISM Bulletin*, 15 December 2021, www.pism.pl.

¹⁰ It is difficult to determine whether China received a heads up from Russia about its planned attack on Ukraine, for example, during Putin’s visit to China in February, but they were informed by the U.S. about the high probability of Russian aggression. E. Wong, “U.S. officials repeatedly urged China to help avert war in Ukraine,” 25 February 2022, www.nytimes.com.

¹¹ “Wang Yi tan zhongguo zai wukelan wenti shang de wu ge jianchi, (Wang Yi on China’s Five Points on the Ukrainian Issue),” MFA of China, 1 April 2022, www.fmprc.gov.cn.

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international situation. In fact, however, the proposals support the political goals of Sino-Russian cooperation in the spirit of the February 2022 declaration. They were repeated in the document, the “Chinese position on a political solution to the Ukrainian crisis”, published by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the first anniversary of the war (24 February 2023),¹² as well as the mutual Sino-Russian statement after Xi Jinping’s visit to Moscow in March 2023.¹³ The contents of the documents were generally backed by Russia at the time, although hesitatingly.

Opportunities for China

The development of political, economic, and also military cooperation with the Russian Federation in order to effectively compete with the “hegemon”—the U.S.¹⁴—is the most important opportunity in the context of the war in Ukraine. China believes that, in a situation in which Putin’s regime remains in power and exerts pressure on the West, Russian aggression will accelerate the processes leading to a change in the international order, the creation of a new security architecture, and the weakening of the U.S. position, all of which ultimately favour China’s priorities in the Indo-Pacific.

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For China, actual support of the Russian aggression is beneficial from the point of view not only of the rivalry with the U.S. but also in deepening Russia’s dependence on China by intensifying bilateral trade relations. China can buy energy resources, mainly crude oil, at lower

prices (also by lending Russia its own tankers to transport the raw material) and sells higher products, such as semiconductors, needed by the Russian economy but unavailable to it due to the Western sanctions. In 2022, bilateral trade increased by over 30% (to \$190 billion¹⁵) and China became the most important trading partner of the Russian Federation. In 2022, export of LNG from Russia to China also doubled. By increasing Russia’s dependence on it, China is able to pursue its own interests in areas where the Russian approach is different or where the interests of the two countries are at least partly competitive. For example, this applies to relations with Belarus,¹⁶ the situation in Central Asia (especially in relations with Kazakhstan), the functioning of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (which was particularly visible during Xi and Putin’s meeting at last year’s summit in Samarkand¹⁷), in BRICS,¹⁸ or over the disagreement with the use or threat of using nuclear weapons in armed conflicts.¹⁹ As presented in the statement from March 2023, China is trying to strengthen its influence in relations with these organisations and countries to show Russia that its actions in these areas should at least be subject to consultations with China.

In multilateral forums (e.g. the UN) or bilateral meetings with European leaders, China tries to present its strategic relations with Russia and support for it as a “responsible approach”. In this context, China sees the Russian aggression against Ukraine as an opportunity to strengthen positive messaging about China in the international community, which is an element of the information and

¹² “China’s position on political settlement of the Ukrainian crisis,” MFA of China, 24 February 2023, www.mfa.gov.cn.

¹³ “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo he eluosi lianbang guanyu shenhua xin shidai quanmian znahue xiezuo huoban guanxi de lianhe shengming (Joint Statement between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination in the New Era),” MFA of China, 22 March 2023, www.mfa.gov.cn.

¹⁴ “Xi Jinping tong eluosi zongtong puding juxing shipin huiwu (Videoconference of President Xi Jinping and President of Russia Vladimir Putin),” MFA of China, 30 December 2022, www.fmprc.gov.cn.

¹⁵ “China’s 2022 trade with Russia hit record \$190 bln—customs,” *Reuters*, 13 January 2023, www.reuters.com.

¹⁶ A. M. Dwyer, “Lukashenko visits China,” *PISM Spotlight*, 6 March 2023, www.pism.pl.

¹⁷ A. Legucka, M. Przychodniak, “What came out of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit and the Xi-Putin Meeting?,” *PISM Spotlight*, 20 October 2022, www.pism.pl.

¹⁸ P. Kugiel, “The Relevance of BRICS after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *PISM Bulletin*, 15 June 2022, www.pism.pl.

¹⁹ A. Dąbrowski, M. Przychodniak, “Biden, Xi Meet in Indonesia,” *PISM Spotlight*, 15 November 2022, www.pism.pl.

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disinformation campaign refreshed by Xi Jinping in 2013.²⁰ This messaging creates the impression of China as a potential mediator between Russia and Ukraine, as well as supports some Western demands present in primarily the German or French public debates, but also in some American circles,²¹ regarding the imminent need for the end of the conflict. By suggesting it has influence over Russia and supports Ukraine (although without supporting its sovereignty or security), China is trying to ratchet up pressure on the U.S. and the European Union. This was the aim, at least in part, of the February statement proposing a resolution of the Ukrainian crisis, formulated in a way suggesting Chinese neutrality, as well as in suggestions for possible talks with the president of Ukraine around the time of Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow in March. This image—but without a real change in policy—was built up earlier by symbolic personnel changes, such as the dismissal in June 2022 of Le Yucheng, the deputy foreign minister responsible for, among others, preparing the declaration of February 2022, or the removal in January this year of Zhao Lijian, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman known for his aggressive rhetoric against the EU and the U.S. Readiness to improve relations is signalled by Fu Cong, the new Chinese ambassador to the EU, appointed in September 2022. Announcements of small deliveries of humanitarian aid from China to Ukraine are also of a similar nature.²²

The conservative stance towards the conflict of most countries in Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America is perceived by China as an opportunity to build its own image in response to a “Cold War mentality”.

The Chinese authorities have treated the Russian aggression against Ukraine as an opportunity to emphasise what they see as emerging divisions in the international community and present their proposals to the Global South. The conservative stance towards the conflict of most countries in Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America is perceived by China as an opportunity to build its own image in response to a “Cold War mentality” attributed to the U.S. China accuses the U.S.

of artificially inflaming the conflict, including through sanctions, attaching to them negative impacts on the social and economic situation of developing countries.²³ In this context, the key element for China is not so much justifying the rightness of Russia's aggression against Ukraine but in referring to its own initiatives as important elements of supporting the development and increasing the security of the countries concerned. It does this through its Belt and Road concept, but above all through the Global Development Initiative (GDI²⁴) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI²⁵), both announced by Xi in 2022, as well as the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) proposed in March this year. The Chinese leader indicated that the GDI and GSI could be possible cooperation platforms during a visit to the Middle East in December 2022 (including a summit with Arab League leaders and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council). New Foreign Minister Qin Gang repeated the idea on his first foreign trip to five African countries (Ethiopia, Angola, Egypt, Benin and Gabon) in January this year. Chinese involvement in global security issues was also emphasised during meetings at the Munich Security Conference in February by Wang Yi (a leading Chinese diplomat, director of the Foreign Affairs Office

²⁰ J. Szczudlik, “Tell China's stories well: implications for the Western narrative,” *PISM Policy Paper* No. 9 (169), 17 September 2018, www.pism.pl.

²¹ In Germany (AFD), France (National Rally), or U.S. (members of the Republican Party) are political groups that within the democratic debate try to pressure their governments to end the war in Ukraine as fast as possible by invoking the possibility of China's mediation.

²² “China to offer Ukraine more humanitarian supplies,” *Xinhua*, 21 March 2022, www.english.news.cn.

²³ “Maintain a global vision, forge ahead with greater resolve and write a new chapter in major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics,” MFA of China, 25 December 2022, www.fmprc.gov.cn.

²⁴ See: M. Page, “Unpacking China's Global Development Initiative,” Lowy Institute, 1 August 2022, www.loyyinstitute.org; Wang Yi, “Jointly Advancing the Global Development Initiative and Writing a New Chapter for Common Development,” MFA of China, 21 September 2022, www.fmprc.gov.cn.

²⁵ See: Pak Yiu, “China's Global Security Initiative: Xi's Wedge in the U.S.-led order,” *Nikkei*, 1 November 2022, www.asia.nikkei.com; L. Fiala, “Rightsizing China's Global Security Initiative,” *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe*, 22 November 2022, www.chinaobservers.eu.

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of the CPC Central Committee). It was Munich where he announced the publication of a policy document on the GSI on 21 February 2023.²⁶ This message was also strengthened by the promotion of Chinese participation in the renewal of diplomatic contacts between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Beijing in March.

Challenges for China

Russia's aggression against Ukraine also raises a number of challenges for China. The prolonged conflict has stalled China's opportunity for its decision-makers to push for further favourable developments in the international arena. However, the Chinese authorities blame the U.S., not Russia, for this situation. The analysis included in Xi Jinping's report from the 20th Party Congress²⁷ pointed to the end of the period of "strategic opportunity" and "peace and development" on which China's growth and expansion of economic and military potential over the past several decades were based. The prospect of "turbulent times" for China's foreign policy in 2023 was outlined in December 2022 in a policy article in the *People's Daily*, the CPC's main press organ.²⁸

Russia's aggression against Ukraine strongly influenced the modification of China's plans towards Taiwan, likely postponing a decision about a possible invasion due to the government's mistrust of the real potential of the Chinese armed forces (largely based on cooperation with Russia) and the possible uniting of Western countries and threat to impose sanctions on China in the event of an invasion (or substantial escalation) towards Taiwan. The implementation of the Chinese plans has also been hindered by a change in the attitude of the U.S. and the EU towards China, now perceived by them as Russia's partner in Ukraine and on countering sanctions. In this context, the progressive change in NATO regarding the threats from China (including its cooperation with Russia) is also important and was incorporated into the Alliance's new strategic concept adopted in June 2022.²⁹

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A significant consequence for China of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, especially in the face of China's difficult economic situation, is the hindering of economic cooperation with the EU (an important export and investment partner). There are also effects from the war in Ukraine in the context of the global food trade³⁰ and the obstruction of important logistics land and rail routes from China to Europe. The negative effects on the Chinese economy, including problems with food supplies, were mentioned by President Xi at the G20 summit in Bali and by other Chinese officials, and were included in the position of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the war in Ukraine from February this year. In transport, the importance of sea deliveries has increased even more (in 2022, shipbuilding in China increased by 15.5%). due to the reduction of rail connections between China and Europe via Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus. Although statistically the Chinese indicate an increase in transport in this direction by 9-10% in 2022,³¹ it resulted mainly from increased exchange with Russia. In real terms, the flow of goods to the EU by rail from the east decreased by 35% from

²⁶ "Global Security Initiative Concept Paper," MFA of China, 21 February 2023, www.mfa.gov.cn.

²⁷ "Full text of the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," MFA of China, 25 October 2022, www.fmprc.gov.cn.

²⁸ Guo Jiping, "Wei dongdang de shijie tigong geng duo wending xing he queding xing. 2022 nian zhongguo tese daguo wajiao yongyi qian, (To better stability and certainty in a world full of turmoil. Brave power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics in 2022)," *Renmin Ribao*, 30 December 2022, www.paper.people.com.cn.

²⁹ W. Lorenz, "China as a Challenge for NATO: Weighing Its Influence on the Collective Defence of the Alliance," *PISM Bulletin*, 15 October 2022, www.pism.pl.

³⁰ In 2021, import of Ukrainian grain accounted for slightly more than 20% of all supplies to China, and corn 29%. Data from: "Ukraine Agricultural Production and Trade," USDA, April 2021, www.fas.usda.gov.

³¹ J. Bachmann, "China-Europe freight trains in 2022: 16,000 trips and 1.6 million TEU's, a year-on-year increase of 9% and 10%," *New Silk Road Discovery*, 6 January 2023, www.newsilkroaddiscovery.com.

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January to June 2022,³² and Ukraine lost its role as an important Belt and Road transport hub due to the war.

The slowdown in the global economy in 2022 also was unfavourable for China and resulted from, among other things, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the related increase in raw material prices, as well as disruptions in supply chains, contributing to high inflation. The Chinese economy is still strongly based on exports, and its most important trading partners are the ASEAN countries (14.6% share in total trade), the European Union (13.4%), and the U.S. (12%). Russia accounted for only 3% of China's trade exchange in 2022. The consequences of the war also will have a negative impact on the global economic situation in 2023. The World Bank forecasts global GDP growth of just 1.7% (down from an estimated 2.9% in 2022), with a significant slowdown in growth in developing countries and stagnation in the U.S. (growth of 0.5% of GDP) and the euro area (0%). Combined with the slow recovery of consumption in China after the lifting of pandemic restrictions, this will limit the country's economic development.

Conclusions

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought some benefits to China, it significantly hampered the country's development prospects and the implementation of its interests. However, it did not change

The Russian invasion of Ukraine did not change China's most important goals in the 2049 perspective, either internally or externally.

China's most important goals in the 2049 perspective, either internally or externally.³³ The plans the authorities presented at the 19th Party Congress in 2017 required modification, which was included in the content of the report presented by Xi during the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, as well as in the position of the Chinese government at the session of the National People's

Congress in March this year. The main goals have been maintained—strengthening the general potential of China, modernising its economy, development of the middle class, increased internal consumption, and better environmental protection), but new ones were also introduced, resulting from the assessment of the effects of the Russian aggression against Ukraine on international relations and Chinese foreign policy. In the eyes of the Chinese authorities, it has become crucial to increase economic self-sufficiency, the country's potential in science and technology, and, above all, to strengthen the state security system and the ability to actively protect China's interests, including in the context of possible sanctions on it in connection with a possible attempt to take over Taiwan by force.

The most important decision in China's foreign policy in the last year has been its strengthening of strategic cooperation with Russia, regardless of the illegal and criminal nature of its policy and aggression against Ukraine. This is primarily intended to serve China's aim to weaken the U.S. and transatlantic cooperation. It is also treated as an important test of Western reactions to possible Chinese offensive actions in the Indo-Pacific, in particular against Taiwan. The consequences of this testing is that China accepts, among other effects, a deterioration of relations with the West, including with the EU (in the context of trade and access to its market). The Chinese authorities try to counteract this by building a softened narrative about the war while maintaining a pro-Russian attitude. However, the key element of China's approach to the war in Ukraine going forward will be that the regime in Russia is maintained and remains oriented towards cooperation with it (e.g., on changes to the international order and in the rivalry with the U.S.) and away from the West. The revisionist convergence of interests of the Putin regime with Xi Jinping and the CPC is key for China's

³² Ganyi Zhang, "Rail Freight: the reconfiguration of the China-Europe market," 27 September 2022, <https://market-insights.apply.com/en/rail-freight-the-reconfiguration-of-the-china-europe-market>.

³³ The goals include building of a "modern socialist state" by 2049, as well as an effective rivalry with the U.S. in the context of China's interests in the Indo-Pacific.

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goals, visible in the clear support that Xi gave to Putin during his March visit to Moscow when he suggested that the Russian leader will take part in the presidential election in 2024. The potential for change in this context related to Russia's defeat in the war could push China to increase its involvement on the Russian side, including significant deliveries of military equipment.³⁴

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China is therefore trying to adapt to the rapidly changing military conditions (including the failures of Russian troops in Ukraine) and political factors and present its policy as moderate, focused on stabilising the situation

and strengthening global security. It masks its support for the Russian demands and attempts to convince the EU and the U.S. that China and Russia have different policies in this area, and thus there is no need to impose sanctions on China or limit economic interdependence. Its use of disinformation³⁵ about the true goals of Chinese policy is intended to mislead participants in the political debate, for example, in the EU. It also makes references to the expectations of Global South countries—the numerous developing states in from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. However, its messaging does not mean a change in China's confrontational stance towards the West. The priority of cooperation with Russia and the strategic nature of it as part of the implementation of China's political goals mean that it may even be tightened. This will depend on the development of transatlantic cooperation in relation to assistance for Ukraine, limits on Russia's economic and military potential, or support for the development of the defence capabilities of Indo-Pacific countries, in particular Taiwan.

³⁴ To date, unofficial information show that China has delivered spare parts for drones and fighter jets, as well as a small number of rifles. See: E. Banco, S.A. Arup, "Hunting rifles, really? China ships assault weapons and body armor to Russia," *Politico*, 16 March 2023, www.politico.com; N. Garcia, "Trade secrets: exposing China-Russia defense trade in global supply chains," C4ADS, 15 July 2022, c4ads.org.

³⁵ J. Szczudlik, A. Legucka, "Breaking Down Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Propaganda About the War in Ukraine," *PISM Strategic File*, 17 January 2023, www.pism.pl.