



China's Strategic Narratives on International Security Issues: Russia's War in Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Angela Pennisi di Floristella¹

Received: 10 January 2025 / Accepted: 3 January 2026
© The Author(s) 2026

Abstract

This paper utilizes a strategic narrative approach to grasp China's views of contemporary international security politics. It explores Chinese international system narratives and policy-issue narratives presented in official policy documents, with reference to the cases of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In particular, this paper asks two questions: How and to what extent are Chinese strategic narratives pertaining to the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza comparable, and what do these narratives reveal about the potential for China to play a stabilizing role amid these conflicts? The comparison of both cases reveals that there is some consistency in China's narratives, as demonstrated by China's aspiration to play a greater role in security. However, by attracting the discontent of unsatisfied countries and presenting China as the leader of the wider international community, Chinese official discourse is also hampered by several ambiguities and contradictions that complicate its ability to play a meaningful role as a global security provider amid contemporary crises.

Keywords China's strategic narratives · China's security narratives · China-Ukraine · China-Israel-Palestinian conflict

Introduction

Narratives are important tools through which rising powers shape the international environment and the domestic discourses of other states. Convincing narratives and ideas can help bring new states and allies into one's orbit; moreover, they can forge

✉ Angela Pennisi di Floristella
angela.pennisidifloristella@um.edu.mt

¹ Department of International Relations, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, Room 207, Old Humanities Building, Msida, Malta

an international environment friendlier to one's interests and values. Narratives are therefore ideational resources leveraged by states to attain their foreign policy goals, and thereby to effect change in the international system.

China's rise has been notably marked by an active use of narrative power. Indeed, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has devoted considerable resources to strengthening China's ability to project narratives compellingly (see, for example, [1–5]). Against these developments, the study of Chinese narratives has flourished, with a growing number of works exploring how the state employs narratives strategically to shape values, assert legitimacy, and define China's global role (6, 7). Among others, Liao [8] has investigated how the state constructs historical myths—such as national victimhood and the CCP's legacy—while interacting with societal actors within a marketized media environment. Hinck et al. [9] have analysed how Chinese media craft strategic narratives around the China Dream to strengthen the legitimacy of the regime and to guide foreign policy. Manantan [10] further demonstrated how Chinese strategic narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic served to promote China's global ambition as a new superpower. The effectiveness of Chinese strategic narratives has also attracted scrutiny, particularly regarding their resonance in regions such as the Pacific Islands [11] and Southeast Asia [12]. Despite this burgeoning literature, little attention has been devoted to the analysis of Chinese narratives on conflict and global security. It was only following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that scholarly attention started to shift towards the study of Chinese security narratives to investigate how Chinese social media commentators and media agencies have framed the war [13–15]. Notwithstanding these efforts, there remains a notable lack of systematic comparative studies analysing China's narratives across different current conflicts. Drawing on these premises, this article comparatively analyses official Chinese discourse with respect to the Ukraine war and the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict by addressing the following questions: How, and to what extent, are China's strategic narratives regarding the wars in Ukraine and Gaza comparable? In addition, what do these narratives reveal about China's understanding of international security and its potential role in response to current and future conflicts?

The contemporary proliferation of interstate conflict has seemingly ushered in a phase of transition in the global security order marked by “the formation of opposing coalitions determined to confront each other over the future of political authority” ([16], p. 120). In light of this transformation in the architecture of international security, a systematic evaluation of Chinese narratives on critical security issues is therefore imperative to make sense of China's understanding of international security and its intentions and potential role in global security governance and the world order transition [17].

In this regard, existing studies on Chinese narratives have reached widely divergent conclusions. Some have argued that China has employed its narrative power to alter the global balance of power in its favour and to reshape exiting norms [18]. Similarly, international relations (IR) scholars have argued that China is courting the Global South and building new spheres of influence to challenge the rules of the international system and construct an alternative world order [19–21]. Others have claimed that China is not willing to overthrow the existing international order but wishes to reform it to better suit its interests [20, 21]. Furthermore, studies on

narratives have increasingly found that Chinese discourse on security issues is not monolithic and that different foreign policy sources present security issues rather differently [14].

Meanwhile, analysing Chinese security narratives in current conflicts is essential amid sustained debates about the nature of China's rise and its likely intentions—debates which have seen scholars widely divided. Realist and power transition theorists have adopted a pessimistic view, arguing that rising powers dissatisfied with the existing order are likely to challenge the status quo and eventually come into conflict with the United States [22, 23, 25, 26]. Conversely, scholars within the liberal camp have emphasized China's integration into the US-led economic order and its growing role in regional and global international institutions [27, 28]. Constructivists have focused instead on China's cultural identity, historical legacy, and continental characteristics, portraying China as a benign actor seeking to reshape the international order in a more constructive and harmonious direction [29, 30].

Against this background, by drawing upon the literature on narrative power and the analytic framework of strategic narrative [31, 32]—which helps to bridge foreign policy analysis and IR through analysis of system, identity, and policy narratives—this article seeks to make an empirical contribution to China's understanding of international security and its potential role in global security governance. Through the use of this analytical framework, this article focuses on official Chinese narratives and deduces whether, and to what extent, themes and policies in Chinese security narratives directed at addressing security crises are aligned in China's official discourse on Russia's war in Ukraine and the current Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In both cases, China is an external actor, and neither conflict lies within China's close security interests. However, China faces the challenge of maintaining a delicate balance, given its significant trade and economic relations with both Ukraine and Israel, as well as its vital energy interests in the Middle East. Compounding this challenge is the prominent role of the United States in both conflicts, which further complicates China's narrative position.

My findings illustrate that although China consistently presents itself as the leader of the wider international community and as an honest broker of peace, its system narratives (views about key international security actors and depiction of security governance) and policy narratives (solutions for managing global security governance) are marred by contradictions and ambiguities. Whereas with respect to the war in Ukraine, global security governance is portrayed as confrontation with the United States as the main instigator of world conflict, the United States's role is largely marginalized in the context of the war in Gaza. Similarly, inconsistencies in Chinese policy narratives can be observed by analysing these cases. Although China's official discourse consistently emphasizes the centrality of the United Nations (UN) system and the need to reform global security governance through a China-centred security vision as laid out in the Global Security Initiative (GSI), in the Ukrainian case, China's policy solutions emphasize the need to find appropriate responses that respect the legitimate concerns of all countries and ensure that the security of one country should not come at the expense of others. Contrastingly, these latter references are largely absent from narratives released in the case of the Israeli–Palestinian

war, where the importance of complying with UN resolutions to adopt a two-state solution and to recognize a Palestinian state are prioritized instead.

In light of the above findings, this article argues that although China's narrative dissonance may reflect a deliberate use of strategic ambiguity—a pragmatic strategy allowing for flexibility and adaptability across different contexts and audiences—it nevertheless entails risks that could compromise China's ability to play a meaningful role in global security in the near future.

Theoretical Framework

Narratives are central elements of human cognition that can significantly impact social and political behaviour ([33], p. 82). It is through narratives that “we can make sense of the world” ([34], p. 321). While discourses, namely the raw material of communication, mainly refer to the language being articulated [11], narratives serve to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation ([32], p. 5). Although discourse and narrative are closely interrelated, they are analytically distinct [35]. Discourse has been conceptualized as “an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being” ([36], p. 3). In this sense, discourse foregrounds language not as a neutral vehicle of communication but as a constitutive social practice. As Fairclough [37] observed, texts serve as sites of struggle where competing voices and meanings vie for dominance. Narrative, by contrast, operates within these broader discursive formations to construct specific storylines that link events, actors, and settings into coherent plots, thereby articulating and legitimizing particular interpretations of international phenomena. Whereas discourse problematizes language to uncover the sociopolitical structures of power, dominance, and resistance that shape meaning [35], narratives serve a dual function: They contribute to “meaning making” and have the capacity to alter perceptions ([38], p. 28). In doing so, narratives endow social practises with meanings and carry significant implications for how individuals interpret reality and act within it.

Narratives thus shape how the international order is conceived and constructed. While all narratives involve some underlying purpose [12], strategic narratives, in addition to articulating sequences of events and identities, are also used as important communicative tools by political actors to project their values and interests in order to strategically manage expectations and “change the discursive environments in which they operate” ([32], p. 3). Accordingly, strategic narratives are a form of soft power utilized to influence public opinion or for strategic purposes. They are used by political actors as communicative tools “to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors” ([31], p. 6). Put differently, they are strategic because they project medium- and long-term goals based on representations of situations, key actors, and beliefs about social and political processes. Strategic narratives thus involve important communicative dimensions that convey how an actor positions

itself, its identity, its worldview, and its aspirations, including lessons for the future and policy suggestions [12, 39].

Given the soft power potential of strategic narratives, rising powers actively utilize them to shape the discursive environment about the international order, influence global agendas, legitimize certain policies, and produce a positive perception of the self among external actors. For emerging powers such as China, whose values and interests stand in sharp contrast to those of the Western liberal tradition, dissemination of persuasive narrative facilitates the reorientation of states' foreign policy behaviours and the legitimation of certain norms and policies. Importantly, a convincing narrative may serve to attract new followers, pave the way for new alliances, and, in turn, reshape other nations' values, interests, and identities in ways more aligned with China's ideas and principles [20].

Therefore, strategic narratives are not an objective representation of events but rather a version of reality aligned to an actor's interests. Strategic narratives are also highly selective, with some parts being omitted and others being emphasized [40]. This selectivity serves to establish a regime of truth: a type of discourse broadly accepted and recognized as true [41]. Strategic narratives become especially important in times of conflict or contestation [12]. It is indeed in turbulent times that a window of opportunity presents itself to legitimate a new vision of the global order and to provide instructions for novel ways forward [12]. In this regard, Menegazzi [42] noted that when relations between powers are strained or when uncertainty prevails, ideas can become highly productive for creating spaces to legitimize new meanings and practises.

Miskimmon et al. [32] identified three levels of strategic narrative analysis. First, system narratives define the structure of the international system and delineate who the key players are and how the system works. This narrative level encompasses relations of authority—how states interact with each other in terms of alignment of interest and prospects for cooperation—and also describes which actors pose a challenge to the system. In other words, this narrative level indicates international actors' desire and opportunity for cooperation, integration, or confrontation in the international order. Furthermore, system narratives make predictions about enemies and allies and outline the scope for the socialization of political actors. System narratives are particularly significant because they contain evidence that can illustrate whether a power is satisfied with the fundamental characteristics of the prevailing global order and power distribution or, alternatively, is dissatisfied and wants to change the existing norms.

Secondly, identity narratives define how actors project their self-image and the norms and values that they embrace into international political fora [43]. Identity narratives thus “seek to frame the identity of particular actors in international affairs” ([44], p. 24), often by constructing particular cultural oppositions between “us” and “them.”

Third, policy narratives are used to influence policy developments, since they set out to explain why a policy is needed and is normatively desirable and how it will be implemented [31]. Revolving around “topical and contextual problems” ([45], p. 490), policy-issue narratives “establish the terrain on which policies on particular issues are formulated” ([44], p. 24).

Taken together, the strategic narrative framework reveals how an actor a) positions itself in the international arena and b) formulates its political aims. Building upon these theoretical premises, this article therefore tries to discern whether China's official discourse projects coherent system and policy narratives, with the central criteria being the consistency of themes and policy priorities in Chinese narratives on current security crises. While there has been agreement that for a strategic narrative to be effective, its main elements need to be consistently deployed and should not be contradictory,¹ other scholars have contended that inconsistency in official narratives may rather reflect the deliberate use of strategic ambiguity [48]. This ambiguity can function as a form of adaptive pragmatism, enabling China to realign its discourse in line with its evolving strategic interests [49]. In this view, inconsistency is calculated vagueness in communication that allows policymakers to accommodate diverse objectives, stakeholders, and audiences [50].

In his influential work *Slogan Politics*, Zeng [17] similarly observed that Chinese leaders often rely on catchy, flexible slogans—*kòutóu*—crafted in ambiguous terms. These slogans serve to articulate political visions, assert authority, and test public sentiment. Such ambiguity grants Chinese policy makers considerable flexibility and adaptability in both domestic governance and international diplomacy, particularly in risky or confrontational settings, where Beijing may recalibrate its position as circumstances evolve [48]. It also enables navigation of internal policy tensions and external criticism by maintaining a degree of rhetorical elasticity [50].

Nevertheless, even scholars who acknowledge the pragmatic value of strategic ambiguity have cautioned that excessive vagueness can generate uncertainty and hinder the long-term viability of initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [50]. In the context of conflict narratives, De Graaf, Dimitriu and Ringsmose [51] warned that incoherent or inconsistent messaging can obstruct the implementation of military strategy, dilute public debate, and erode trust in foreign and security policy. While some degree of inconsistency may make narratives more easily adaptable to different audiences and to changing circumstances, the narrative will lose credibility if its main components and key ideas are changed too often [47]. Ultimately, when actors agree on system narratives and on the characteristics of the self, it becomes more feasible for them to agree on policy narratives. In contrast, discrepancies between system and identity narratives make it more difficult to agree on policies and solutions to manage global problems [52].

On this basis, the next section will provide a brief historical overview and analysis of the political and economic stakes of China's involvement with the Ukrainian and Israeli–Palestinian conflicts, to provide context for the subsequent discussion of China's strategic narratives within these two conflicts.

¹An emerging literature regards coherence as an essential element of strategic narratives. Among others, Van Noort [46] has analyzed elements of competing narratives within the BRICS group. Ringsmose and Børgesen [47], have developed an analytical framework based on the following elements to assess the coherence of strategic narratives: (a) clarity of purpose, (b) prospect of success, (c) consistency, and (d) absence of strong competing narratives.

China's Historical Relations with the Israel–Palestine Issue and with Ukraine

China has historically expressed strong sympathy for the Palestinian cause and has consistently supported Palestinian demands for national self-determination [53]. Following the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, China supported armed resistance against Israel and took symbolic steps to support the Palestinian national movement, notably by opening an embassy in Beijing for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1974 [53]. However, China's admission to the UN in 1971, the normalization of relations with the United States, and the domestic reform agenda initiated by Deng Xiaoping marked a shift in its foreign policy to the region. During this period, ideological radicalism was increasingly replaced by pragmatic diplomacy more closely subordinated to China's broader developmental goals [53]. Beijing began to support diplomatic initiatives, such as the agreement normalizing relations between Egypt and Israel brokered at Camp David in 1978, and gradually adopted a more moderate and less militant approach [53]. Although the People's Republic of China announced its recognition of the State of Palestine in 1988, it also established formal diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992. Since then, China has consistently endorsed a two-state framework as outlined in the Oslo Accords. This position was reaffirmed in May 2013 through Xi Jinping's Four-Point Proposal with China's support for an independent Palestinian state and peaceful coexistence between Palestine and Israel.

China's increasingly pragmatic stance has coincided with the expansion of bilateral ties with Israel, particularly in the realms of technology, agriculture, and industry [54]. Despite Beijing's continued rhetorical support for the Palestinian case and criticism of Israeli policies, the volume of trade with Israel has expanded significantly [55]. As Burton [53] noted, while Sino-Palestinian trade more than tripled from \$26 million to \$82 million between 2010 and 2019, it was far outpaced by the much larger volume of trade with Israel, which doubled from \$7.6 billion to \$14.7 billion in the same period. In 2017, China and Israel elevated their ties to the level of an innovative comprehensive partnership. Israel's participation in the BRI initiative has further expanded opportunities for Chinese companies, which have been involved in major infrastructure projects such as the Haifa tunnels, the Afula–Karmiel Railway, and the Tel Aviv Red Line Tunnel. Furthermore, Israel has become a key node for China's Middle East diplomacy, partly to secure vital energy interests—approximately 56% of China's oil imports originate from the region (notably from Saudi Arabia and Iran)—but also to act as a platform to facilitate cooperation with major powers including the United States and the European Union [56].

Turning now to China's relations with Ukraine, diplomatic ties date back to 1992, shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Since then, bilateral ties have alternated between periods of engagement and tension, shaped in large part by Ukraine's strategic location between Russia and the West [57, 58]. The wave of “Colour Revolutions” that swept across the post-Soviet region between 2003 and 2004, in which authoritarian governments were overthrown through mass mobilization, raised alarms in Beijing about the potential for similar unrest within China [59]. Relations cooled further during the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010), who was viewed in Beijing as being sympathetic to Taiwan [58]. By contrast, under the pro-

Russian presidency of Viktor Yanukovich (2010–2014), economic ties improved significantly, culminating in Ukraine being granted the status of a strategic partner by China in 2011.

The 2014 outbreak of the conflict in Crimea and Donbas presented new diplomatic challenges for Beijing. Because China has consistently upheld the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, it avoided directly criticizing Russia's actions [59]. Beijing adopted instead a cautious approach to avoid entanglement in Western sanctions targeting Moscow, while maintaining and expanding ties with Kyiv [59]. Between 2017 and 2020, China–Ukraine trade grew significantly—from \$2.1 billion to \$7.1 billion—driven largely by rising Ukrainian exports of iron ore (up 264%), corn (up 327%), and other agricultural products such as grains and vegetable oils [57]. In 2019, China overtook Russia to become Ukraine's largest individual trading partner [60]. This growing economic interdependence was reinforced through a Chinese policy of bank loans and commitments to infrastructure investment [58]. High-level political engagement also reflected this shift. In January 2017, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko met with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, where the two leaders discussed formally endorsing the BRI [58]. In July 2021, China and Ukraine signed a bilateral agreement to expand cooperation in infrastructure development.

Research Methodology and Case Study Selection

To analyse Chinese strategic narratives on the war in Ukraine and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, this study has combined qualitative content analysis with the corpus linguistic (CL) approach through the help of the KH Coder, a visualization software specialized in text mining developed by Koichi Higuchi at Ritsumeikan University in 2001. One possible criticism of interpretative research is based on concerns surrounding the generalizability, reliability, and representation of findings. In this regard, CL is a useful method for qualitative processing of linguistic data, which has been increasingly incorporated in qualitative research to explain and interpret patterns by reducing researcher bias and subjectivity inherent in content and discourse analysis [61, 62].

CL allows for the extraction of distributional information from a corpus [63]. The high frequency of particular words can help to objectively determine the focus of analysis by identifying the most important themes that appear significantly more often in the corpus [61, 62]. Distributional information is also especially useful in the context of comparative analysis. The comparison of different corpora allows for the visualization of words that occur more or less frequently in one corpus compared with another [64]. While individual words certainly offer a useful starting point given that “the more frequent a word is, the more meanings it is likely to have” ([65], p. 42), they cannot fully capture the richness of language use [66], nor can they convey the subtle nuances present in real-life communication [65]. A well-known critique of corpus-based approaches is their tendency to overlook context [67]. Furthermore, a corpus cannot interpret data on its own; frequency lists require careful contextual interpretation to yield meaningful insights.

To mitigate these limitations, scholars have suggested analysing co-occurrence patterns and text excerpts, which help to infer contextual elements, reconstruct meaning, and illustrate arguments regarding the functions of strategic narratives [66, 68]. In this regard, the KH Coder software allows an automatic co-occurrence network analysis of the corpora to be generated by connecting 60 pairs of the most strongly co-occurring words by lines [69]. In this way, several groups of words strongly connected with one another are automatically detected and displayed with different colours, thereby allowing for the further identification of key themes pertaining to Chinese system and policy narratives in the corpora. Furthermore, to overcome the limitations of purely descriptive analysis, the CL method was integrated with qualitative content analysis [65] based on inductive analysis of selected texts to uncover further characteristics surrounding China's view of system and policy-issue narratives.

With regard to data collection, official Chinese sources translated into English have been employed, which were gathered from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) website and include official statements, leaders' speeches, and spokesperson remarks. Although these sources may not represent an exhaustive corpus of official discourse—given the opacity of China's political system, censorship that might be applied by the government, and the fact that China is not a unitary actor—they are nonetheless authoritative and centralized sources that unveil the official Chinese position on crucial security issues. It is also worth noting that although the English translations of Chinese foreign policy statements may not fully reflect leaders' policy intentions and objectives, they are nevertheless useful to identify which themes, issues, and priorities Chinese leaders have chosen to articulate [11].

Temporally, the analysis covers the period from February 2022 to August 2022 for the Ukraine conflict and from October 2023 until May 2024 for the conflict taking place in Palestine. The dataset includes 115 documents (49,860 tokens) for the Ukraine case and 113 documents (57,340 tokens) for the Israeli–Palestine case. Documents were collected using the following keywords: “Ukraine,” “Russia–Ukraine,” “Palestine,” “Gaza,” and “Israel–Palestine conflict.” The selected time frame of analysis was chosen to capture periods of peak discursive activity, because in both cases, the MFA released a high number of statements in the early stages of the conflicts.

The case studies have been chosen for a variety of reasons. Although the wars in Ukraine and Gaza are certainly different in nature—one is a war initiated by an expansionist superpower wherein two sovereign states are pitted against each other, while the other is a confrontation between a state and non-state actor—they nonetheless feature a number of similarities. First, in both cases China is an outside player and is not a direct belligerent. These struggles are not taking place in an area close to its core security interests, such as the Indo- or Asia-Pacific. Although Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine dates to almost two years before Hamas's terrorist attack on Israel, the time span of these two wars is roughly equivalent, so one might expect China to deliver similar strategic narratives.

Second, both cases require China to play a careful balancing act between economic and political considerations among the conflicting parties. As discussed above, the CCP has a long history of friendly relationships with Palestine; since the 1960s China has recognized and actively supported the PLO, which received financial and arms assistance from China while PLO leader Yasser Arafat carried

out state visits to China during the Mao and Deng eras. China was also one of the first countries to recognize Palestinian sovereignty and to establish full diplomatic relations with the state of Palestine in 1989. More recently, during a visit to Beijing by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, a strategic partnership with the PLO was inaugurated, and on several occasions, Chinese President Xi Jinping has made direct statements of support for an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. Yet China is also Israel's third largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching \$23 billion in 2022. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies's China Connects database, China has invested in more BRI projects in Israel than in any other country in the region [70]. Israel's technology sector received the most significant Chinese investment, both in terms of monetary value (\$5.7 billion) and the number of companies (54 out of 87 investments), between 2011 and 2018 [70]. Furthermore, as noted previously, Israel plays a central role in China's Middle East diplomacy.

In a similar vein, although China and Russia have deepened their economic, military and diplomatic cooperation, especially since the announcement of their no limits relationship, Ukraine is also strategically significant for China. Ukraine is a member of China's BRI and has been an important transit hub of the Eurasian Land Bridge—a network of railways that connects Europe and Asia, which is mainly constructed or sponsored by China [71].² The two countries have signed \$3 billion in construction contracts in the transportation and energy sectors [72], and China has heavily relied on Ukraine for strategic energy, agriculture, and mining product imports.

Last but not least, the United States is a critical security provider and guarantor for both Ukraine and Israel. The United States has provided approximately \$61.4 billion in military assistance since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and approximately \$64.1 billion in military assistance since Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014 [73]. Although the United States and Israel do not have a formal mutual defence pact, Israel is considered one of the few "major non-NATO allies" [74]. Since October 7, 2023, the United States has provided at least \$12.5 billion in direct military aid to Israel [74]. The Biden administration also strengthened the US military presence in the Middle East, further expanding its existing deployment to protect American facilities and vessels, as well as to support Israel's defence [74]. Both conflicts are therefore important test cases for China's attitude and understanding of the US role within contemporary security governance.

Chinese Strategic Narratives amid Current Conflicts

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, China's strategic narratives reveal how China interprets the international order and its key players as well as the policy priorities and solutions that it deems as most suitable to solve these conflicts. The following analysis will explore the Ukrainian case and the Palestinian case by first looking

²The trade value between China and Ukraine reached \$19.3 billion in 2021 [71]. China is an important market for Ukraine. However, for China, the bilateral trade with Ukraine is only 0.2% of China's total foreign trade, in comparison with about 2.3% with Russia.

into Chinese official system narratives, then proceeding to delve into how policy narratives have been projected.

China's System Narratives: Russia's War in Ukraine

As evidenced in the co-occurrence network of words concerning the war in Ukraine (see Fig. 1), China perceives itself as the key force for “peace” that plays an active role in promoting “stability” and a “peaceful settlement” of the dispute. Discourses released by the MFA show that China frequently refers to itself as a “responsible and major country” [75] and as a benign power that has “played a constructive role in maintaining world peace and stability.” For example, one source states, “China has always been a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development and a guardian of international order” [76].

In contrast, by utilizing a polarizing narration, Chinese sources repeatedly describe the United States as bearing the greatest responsibility for the conflict in Ukraine [13]. Both the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are seen as conflict initiators that systematically challenge world peace and security, break their international commitments, and continue to imperialistically expand eastward [77]. While Chinese narratives portray Russia's violation of Ukrainian sovereignty not as an act of aggression in violation of international law but as a mere “crisis,” the United States is described as the main instigator of the conflict (see also Fig. 1),

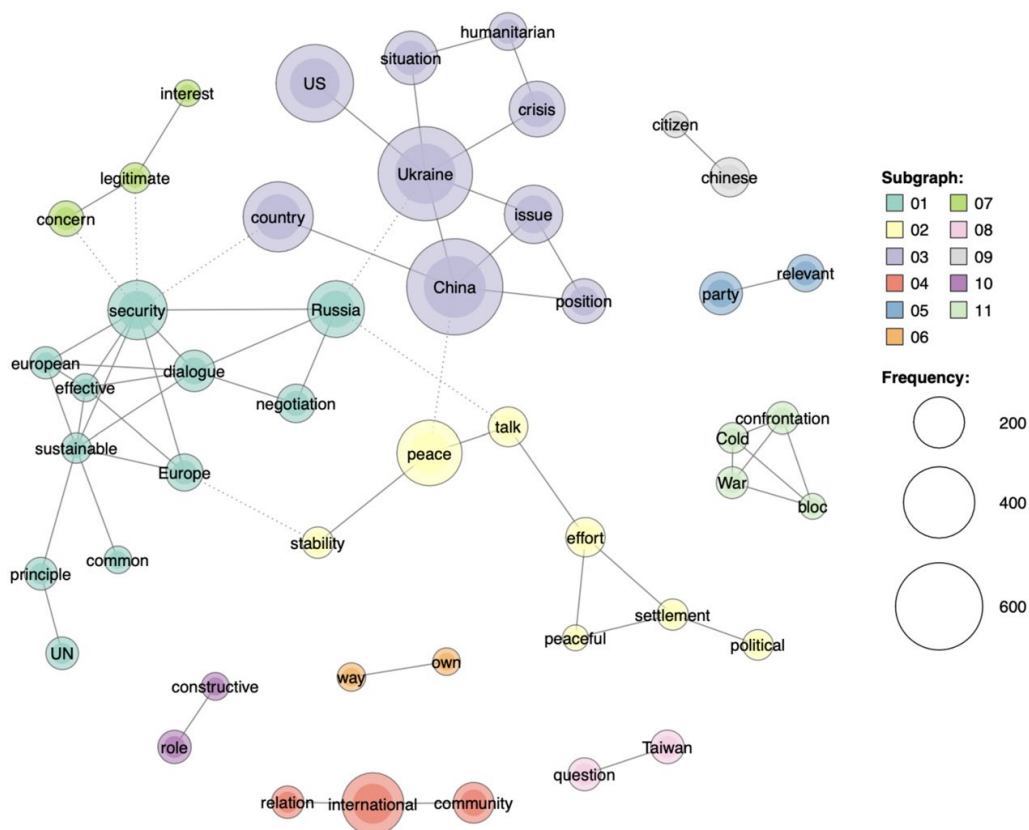


Fig. 1 Co-occurrence network of words for Russia's war in Ukraine. Source: Author's own compilation based on sources from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

due to its hegemonic impositions, coerciveness, and Cold War mentality, as shown in the following statement: “On Ukraine, we urge the U.S. side to face up to its due responsibilities as the one that created the crisis, and work actively toward resolving the issue through dialogue and ending bloc confrontation, instead of fanning the flames” [78]. In particular, sources refer to the “the US’ decision on NATO’s eastward expansion” as “directly linked to the Ukraine crisis” [75]. U.S. responsibility is also confirmed by the word frequency featured in China’s official strategic narratives (see Fig. 2).

Indeed, while the “United States” is mentioned 472 times, “Russia” appears only 252 times in the CL. History-infused arguments are also often utilized to back Russia’s narratives of victimization. In particular, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is presented as a rational defensive approach taken to safeguard its legitimate security concerns in response to eastward expansion by the United States and NATO [13]. This rhetoric suggests a closer alignment of interests between China and Moscow, which is also witnessed by frequent references to their shared vision about a post-Western order underpinned by the principles of “mutual respect, equity, justice and win-win cooperation” [79] and by a common “new model of major-country relations in line with the principles of non-alliance, non-confrontation and non-targeting of any third party” [80]. Chinese narratives not only refrain from criticizing Russia but also frame Russia as a pillar of a sustainable European security architecture (see Fig. 1). Accordingly, European countries are urged to “sit down with Russia to have an in-depth and comprehensive dialogue to discuss building a balanced, effective and sustainable European security mechanism, so as to achieve long-term peace and stability in Europe” [81].

Even though Chinese strategic narratives allude to the closeness of Sino-Russian ties, it is also true that they are contradictory and ambiguous on the status of

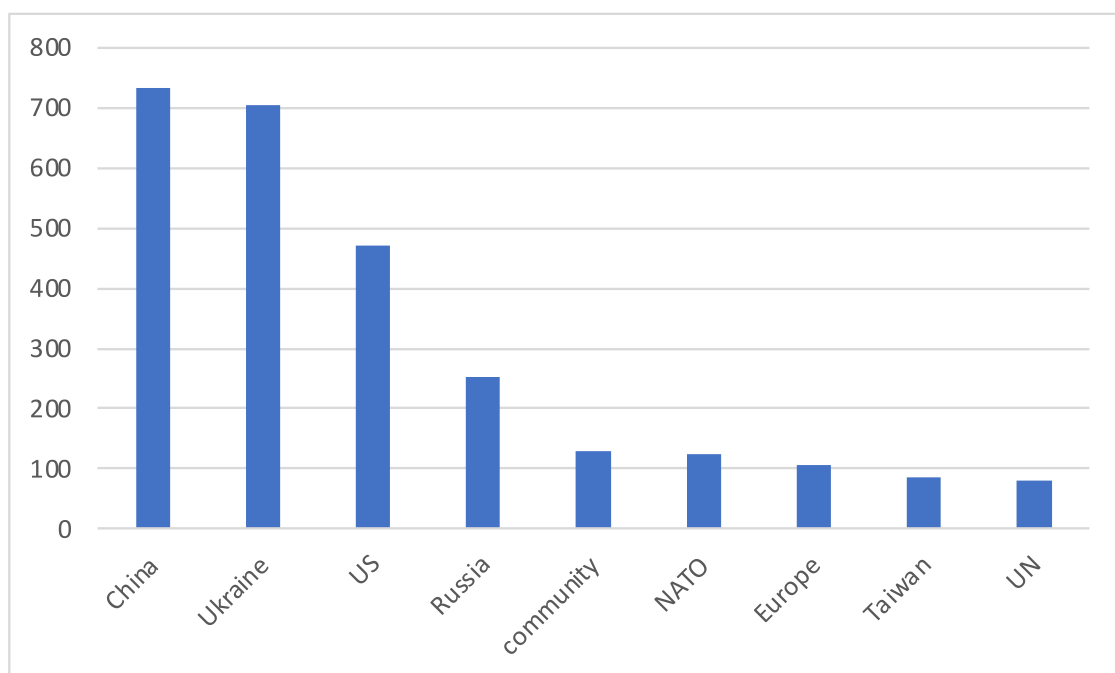


Fig. 2 Key system actors of the Russia’s war in Ukraine. Source: Author’s own compilation based on sources from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

their relationship. For instance, reaffirming a traditional non-alliance stance, China's discourses warn against the misinterpretation of the relationship as constituting a "Beijing-Moscow Axis" [82], thereby casting a shadow over the prospect of a Sino-Russian alliance. As one source outlines, "China has been and will remain an independent country that decides its position according to the merits of each matter, immune from external pressure or interference" [82].

It is lastly worth observing that the "international community" is projected as a key system actor within Chinese strategic narratives (see Fig. 2). This community is often depicted in antagonistic terms *vis-à-vis* the United States, as a victim of the United States's unilaterally defined rules and of its "bullying and hegemonic practices" [83]. If, on the one hand, this message serves to attract the discontent of unsatisfied countries—especially in the Global South—by presenting a highly contested international system, on the other hand, it also serves to project China as a rising state actor ready to play an alternative constructive role and to champion the neglected voices and interests of the international community.

China's Policy Narratives: Russia's War in Ukraine

Turning now to China's policy narratives, the following main themes can be detected in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. First, reforming the global security governance system in line with a novel security vision is one of the Chinese MFA's most desirable outcomes. These principles are laid down in the GSI, introduced by President Xi Jinping at the Boao Forum for Asia on 21 April 2022 and further elaborated in a concept paper released in 2023. The GSI outlines the core tenets of China's security vision, signalling its aspiration to lead global security governance reform. In specific, the GSI is described as the fundamental solution to promote peace through a new type of security that replaces confrontation, alliance, and a zero-sum approach with principles of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security, which largely reflect Asian security culture and China's traditional security discourse.

As shown in Fig. 1, the term "security" is closely connected to the following themes: "sustainable," "common," "negotiation," and "dialogue." China's official vision also aligns with the belief that the appropriate response to the crisis in Ukraine should hinge on the notion that "the security of one country should not come at the expense of the security of other countries" and that the legitimate security concerns of all countries should be respected to achieve lasting peace and stability (see, for example, [84]). These terms figure prominently in the Chinese CL, which frequently stresses that the "legitimate security concerns" ($n = 16$) of countries "must be taken seriously" (see, for example, [85]). The fact that the MFA attaches such importance to respecting countries' legitimate concerns indicates a somewhat nuanced and flexible understanding of sovereignty. It also suggests that the MFA has sought to propagate the idea that the principle of sovereignty should not be treated according to a single standard but understood in terms of the context under question.

In addition to advocating for a novel security vision, Chinese official sources cite "dialogue" ($n = 133$) and "negotiation" ($n = 114$) as appropriate conflict resolution mechanisms in the context of the Ukrainian war (see Fig. 3). References to this dialogue-centred approach are often put in direct opposition to US-led unilateral sanc-

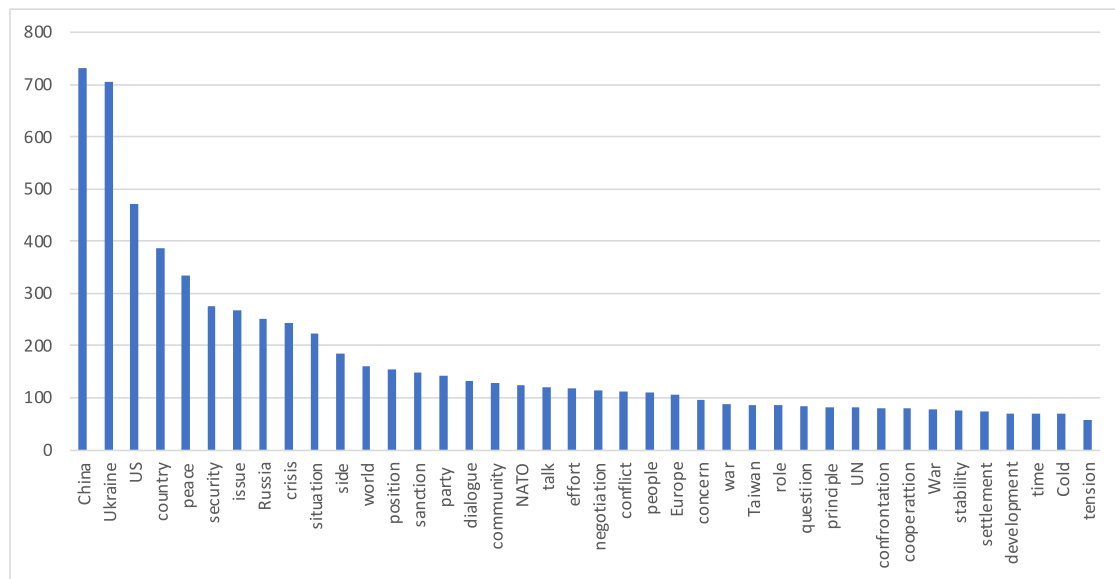


Fig. 3 Frequency of nouns associated with Russia's war in Ukraine: top 40. Source: Author's own compilation based on sources from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

tions, which are portrayed as illegal, with no basis in international law, and bypassing the authority of the UN Security Council (UNSC; [86]). Sanctions are described as instruments of division and confrontation causing severe disruption, especially in developing countries and in Europe, and as “far from being a solution” [86]. Official narratives also prioritize humanitarian issues, including the protection and safety of the civilian population and infrastructure, as imperative for the prevention of a humanitarian crisis. It is lastly worth observing that China's policy narratives attach great importance to the UN system, including the UNSC and the principles of the UN Charter, which are deemed to be key assets for building a sustainable security architecture.

While prioritizing UN centrality, the need for a novel security approach, and dialogue-centred mechanisms, Chinese policy narratives do not prescribe any specific behaviours to address the conflict in Ukraine. While in principle no country would explicitly oppose the importance of dialogue and cooperation as conflict resolution mechanisms, it remains unclear how China is willing to reconcile the irreconcilable positions of Russia wanting to annex Ukraine to secure itself and Ukraine striving to preserve its sovereign territorial integrity [13].

China's System Narratives: The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

In the context of the conflict, China's system narratives place centrality on the following themes. First, China describes itself as a central player for the promotion of peace. As displayed by the co-occurrence network depicted in Fig. 4, China perceives itself as the main promoter of “peace” and as a key contributor to global security. China projects itself as a benevolent and responsible power and as a key advocate of international “law.” During the sampled period, China is the most frequently cited actor in the corpus ($n = 718$), demonstrating further its confidence and aspiration to become a leader in global security governance (see Fig. 5).

Second, China attempts to position itself as closely aligned to the “international community,” with both being placed within the same linguistic cluster (see Fig. 4). The international community ($n = 126$) is regarded as a key system actor that should take “urgent action” and “shoulder responsibility” [87] for the conflict. At the same time, Chinese sources emphasize how the international community, including Arab countries, are commending “China’s just position” and are looking at China to play a greater security role [88]. To this point, sources also state that China is responding to the “strong appeal” by the international community [89] to put an end to the historical injustice to the Palestinians by implementing a two-state solution, as suggested by the following statement:

China will echo the call of the international community and step-up coordination with relevant parties, especially Arab countries, to uphold justice, build up consensus, and galvanize timely, responsible and meaningful actions in the Security Council to deescalate the conflict, protect civilians, ease the humanitarian situation and restore the peace process, and strive to bring the Palestinian question back to the track of the two-state solution. [90]

Interestingly, China and the broader international community are described as united in their vision for the resolution of conflict in the Middle East and as acting in solidarity to stop the fighting, protect civilians, guarantee access of humanitarian assistance, and restore the peace process and justice.

Third, the Gaza situation is one of the prevailing system narratives of China’s official sources, as shown by both Figs. 4, 5 and 6. For China, Gaza is the main victim of the conflict, facing a catastrophic humanitarian crisis and high civilian casualties. Departing from historical neutrality in which Chinese officials had sought to carefully avoid confronting Israel directly, official discourse strongly empathizes with the suffering of the Palestinian people oppressed by an entrenched conflict dating back to “seventy-six years ago” when “over half of the Palestinian population fled or were driven from their homes during the 1948 Arab–Israeli war” [91]. Terms such as “historical injustice,” “collective punishment,” “forced displacement” and neglect of “legitimate rights” are utilized in the context of Palestine and Palestinians. Inter

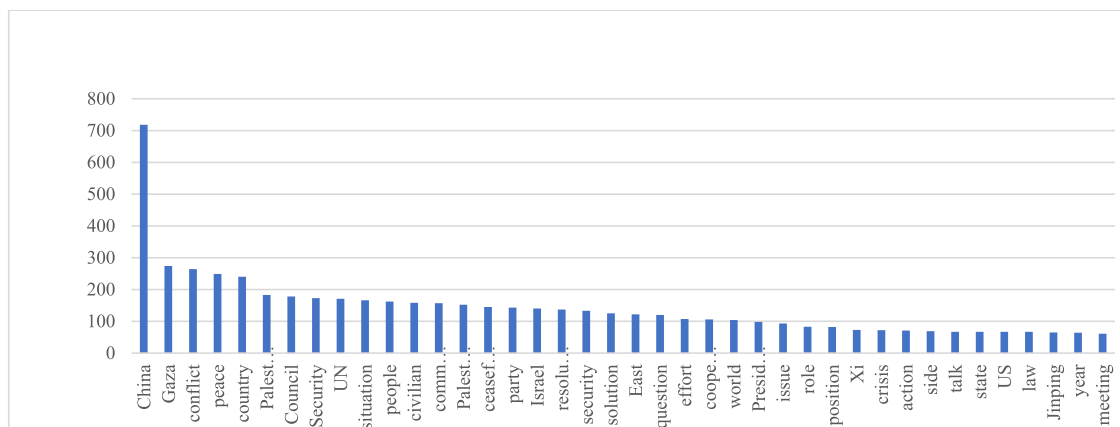


Fig. 6 Frequency of nouns relating to the Palestinian–Israeli Conflict: top 40. Source: Author’s own compilation based on sources from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

alia, it is stated, “The historical injustice to the Palestinians must not be allowed to continue uncorrected from generation to generation” [92] and “The collective punishment of people in Gaza in the form of forced transfer or water, electricity and fuel deprivation must stop” [93].

Chinese official storytelling also openly blames Israel for the oppression of Palestinians. Israel’s actions of “settlement construction,” “ground military operation in Rafah,” “attacks in the southern Gaza city,” “military operation at Dar Al-Shifa hospital,” and the use of indiscriminate violence are presented as severe violations of international law and as major obstacles to lasting peace. Inversely, only limited reference has been made to the release of hostages and to Israel’s right of self-defence. Israel and its Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are also accused of rejecting “any international involvement or any guarantee from international community for a permanent solution in Palestine” [94]. Conversely, Hamas and the brutality of its attacks are not frequently cited in the corpus, nor is Hamas condemned as a terrorist organization. Hamas is instead presented as an official political entity that should be involved in the process of promoting Palestinian reconciliation (see, for example, [95]).

Against this background, two issues are worth mentioning that pertain to the “big absentees” from China’s system narratives. First, the United States is barely mentioned in the CL ($n = 67$) and does not even appear as a central theme in the co-occurrence network, despite its longstanding alliance with Israel and its proactive policy in the Middle East. Second, only very limited reference is made to Russia and Iran. For instance, the deepening of Sino-Russian relations is only occasionally mentioned in relation to their joint rejection of a US-drafted UNSC resolution and their calls for a ceasefire in Gaza. Limited emphasis is also made on Iran, which official sources have carefully avoided condemning. Specifically, Iranian-aligned Houthi rebels’ attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea and Iran’s attack on 13 April 2024 are both described “as a spillover of the Gaza conflict” [96].

China’s Policy Narratives: The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

Turning now to the policy narratives that Chinese official sources perceive as most appropriate to respond to the Israel–Palestine conflict, these can be summed up with three main themes. First, China attaches utmost importance to the authority and central role of the UN and to the Security Council, which “shoulders primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security and should thus play an active and constructive role on the question of Palestine” ([93]). As displayed in Fig. 4, the UN, “security,” and “council” are connected by lines with the “resolution” of the conflict. Analysis of word frequency (Fig. 6) highlights that for China the immediate priorities are a “ceasefire” ($n = 145$) in Gaza (which can be achieved only through the implementation of the UNSC Resolution 2728), the suspension of all violence and attacks against “civilians” ($n = 158$), and the provision of “humanitarian” assistance to prevent further wreckage and humanitarian catastrophe. In this regard, despite allegations that some employees of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) were involved in the 7 October 2023 attacks, the agency is described as an “indispensable and irreplaceable” actor

for humanitarian assistance for the people of Gaza [97], and China has urged countries to restore the financing of UNRWA.

Second, in line with China's traditional approach of advocating for the complete recognition of the Palestinian state, Chinese official sources connect the "solution" ($n = 125$) of the conflict to "a comprehensive settlement" based on a two-state solution (Fig. 4). Sources frequently state that "restoring justice to the Palestinian people and fully implementing the two-State solution" is "the only way to break the vicious cycle of Palestinian–Israeli conflicts, to eliminate the breeding ground of extremist ideologies, and to realize enduring peace in the Middle East" [92].

Finally, official discourses emphasize the need for dialogue-centred approaches as mechanisms to build up "peace" (Fig. 4). Interestingly, a "conference" is suggested as a suitable mechanism "to promote [a] comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the Palestinian question" [98]. On the one hand, this underscores China's attempt to present itself as an alternate player in the Middle East and demonstrates its ambition to play a more active role as a peace broker whose mediation efforts to end that conflict are contrasted with perceived US inaction [99]. On the other hand, it also serves China's goal to cement and deepen further relations between itself and the Arab world in a region which has become increasingly important for China, not in the least due to the Middle East and North Africa's large market share of Chinese exports.

Comparative Analysis and Tentative Conclusions

The above empirical analysis has shown that to some extent, Chinese strategic narratives adopt similar themes in relation to Russia's war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza. They highlight China's aspiration to play a greater role in global security as the legitimate advocate of the values, interests, and aspirations of the international community. In line with its cultural tradition, China projects itself as a force for good and peace. In both conflicts, official narratives place considerable emphasis on the rising role of the international community, which is described in a rather elastic and flexible manner to incorporate—depending on the issue at stake—different countries in opposition to the traditional dominant powers (particularly, the US-led coalition). The UN is regarded as the key institution through which security crises and collective action problems should be resolved.

However, some dissonant elements also feature in China's official discourse on these two conflicts, as summarized in Table 1. With respect to system narratives, while the Ukrainian conflict has been portrayed as a struggle over the future world order—with the US-centred bloc on one side and Russia on the other—the Gaza war is depicted as a mere regional hotspot. In the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China has repeatedly blamed the United States, and to some extent the Western bloc, for turbulence and threats to security in world politics.

Curiously, however, strategic narratives about the Palestinian–Israeli conflict have only marginally referred to the United States's "hegemonic, domineering and bullying nature" [100], its denial of full UN membership to Palestine [101], and its unconditional support of Israel by vetoing an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza.

Table 1 Comparison of Chinese strategic narrative: Russia's war in Ukraine versus the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Source: Author's own compilation

Conflict	China's system narratives	China's policy narratives
Russia's invasion of Ukraine	<p>China is a promoter of peace, while the US/West promotes a Cold War mentality based on confrontation.</p> <p>The Ukraine crisis is a global conflict between the US/West and Russia. The United States holds the greatest responsibility for the conflict in Ukraine while Russia has reacted to NATO expansion. The international community is a rising actor whose voice needs to be heard. China backs Russia's victimization narrative despite maintaining a distance from it.</p>	<p>China supports a shift towards a new security vision and approach to solve current security challenges. This vision as laid down in the GSI is hinged on respect for countries' legitimate security concerns and on the principle that the security of one country should not come at the expense of others. Dialogue-centred mechanisms are the key conflict resolution tools. China attaches high importance to the UN system to solve security crises.</p>
Israeli–Palestinian conflict	<p>The conflict in Palestine has a regional nature. Palestine is the main victim of the conflict while Israel is responsible for the humanitarian disaster and violation of international law.</p> <p>China is a promoter of peace and belongs to the wider "international community."</p> <p>The United States is a marginal player.</p>	<p>UN resolutions serve as fundamental instruments for conflict resolution, to promote a ceasefire and de-escalation, and safeguard humanitarian issues. Recognition of the Palestinian state on the basis of a two-state solution; respect for international law and centrality of dialogue-centred mechanisms as conflict resolution tools. China supports a shift from old security concepts and calls for a broad-based conference to achieve reconciliation in the Middle East.</p>

Although China's effort to cement relations with the Arab world might indicate an attempt to curb American influence in the Middle East, the empirical analysis highlights that the United States is largely marginalized by China's official narratives. The United States—quite surprisingly—does not figure prominently in China's corpus ($n = 67$) and is absent from the co-occurrence network pertaining to the Gaza war.

It is also interesting to note that a condemnation of the US approach is sometimes juxtaposed with a call for joint Sino-US cooperation, as shown by the following excerpts:

President Xi Jinping incisively pointed out that for China and the United States, turning one's back on another is not an option; it is unrealistic for one side to remodel the other; and conflict and confrontation has unbearable consequences

for both sides. The right way forward is to follow the principles of mutual respect, peaceful co-existence and win-win cooperation. [102]

We hope that the US can play a constructive role and bring issues back to the track of political settlement. [103].

One may therefore argue that despite China's effort to capitalize on the Gaza conflict by appealing to actors and societies that are sensitive to the Palestinian cause and by challenging a world order and security governance dominated by the United States, there is not sufficient evidence that China aims to fully displace the United States's political and security roles. The discrepancy in Chinese narratives towards the United States can likely be explained by the different role and interests that the United States holds in in these two conflicts. Unlike the case of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, where US support for Israel is primarily focused on security and regional stability in the Middle East, US involvement in Ukraine is part of a global strategy aimed at containing Russian expansionism and maintaining the post-World War II international order. The war in Ukraine is framed as a crucial battle for the defence of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and democratic values in Europe. While the United States provides significant military aid to Israel and supports its right to self-defence, it also advocates for a two-state solution and promotes security and stability in the Middle East—despite the ambiguity introduced by President Trump, which might signal a potential decline in the prospect of a two-state solution.

However, these explanations do not alter the fact that China is sending mixed and sometimes contradictory messages, particularly in terms of the potential for cooperation or competition. In the case of Ukraine, China has echoed Moscow's rhetoric. As recently revealed by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's talks with European Union (EU) leaders, a Russian defeat is not an option, as it would allow the United States and its allies to pivot fully toward the Indo-Pacific [104]. Inversely, the relative absence of reference to the United States in the context of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict might indicate a degree of alignment between Washington and Beijing, particularly in their shared emphasis on regional stability and economic development [105]. More specifically, China's interest in safeguarding uninterrupted energy flows in the Middle East, particularly through the Strait of Hormuz—which accounts for approximately half of China's crude oil imports—helps explain its reluctance to engage in direct confrontation with the United States and its balanced approach aimed at preventing a broader regional escalation of the conflict.

In a similar vein, the extent to which China will lean towards Russia remains open to debate. Although China has backed Russia's victimization rhetoric in the case of Ukraine and has joined Russia in throwing nominal support behind Hamas and refusing to denounce the group's 7 October 2023 attacks on Israel, there is no indication of the prospective emergence of a Sino-Russian alliance. Despite a new joint statement suggesting greater cooperation and coordination than in the past, China has recently published a white paper on national security that did not use the phrase "alliance" but instead stated the relationship with Russia had "unique strategic value" [106]. One might have also expected greater reference to Russia as a key strategic partner for China amid the Palestinian conflict, but the analysis reveals that very little attention was devoted to it.

Relevant inconsistencies can also be observed in China's policy narratives. While narratives in both conflicts prioritize the need to adopt dialogue-centred and diplomatic tools, de-escalation, and ceasefire and emphasize the importance of guaranteeing humanitarian needs, they also identify different appropriate responses to resolve these crises. The GSI, which was at the centre of policy narratives pertaining to Russia's war in Ukraine and was presented as a pillar of an alternative security governance, does not hold the same salience in the current Israeli–Palestinian conflict. It is certainly true that in both cases, official discourses call for abandoning traditional security concepts; however, these calls are shaped by conceptual vagueness and by broad and general ideas.

Of no less importance, central themes such as “abandoning the logic of ensuring one's own security at the expense of others” and “the need to accommodate the legitimate security concerns” of all parties, which have dominated narratives about the Ukrainian conflict serving to promote a Sino-centred security vision, are largely absent in the narratives released during the Gaza war and are replaced by the call to meet the “legitimate rights” and aspirations of the Palestinian people. Official narratives have also emphasized the importance of respecting international law and justice through a two-state solution and a more inclusive (possibly less antagonistic) approach, as suggested by the call for a broad-based conference to achieve reconciliation in the Middle East.³ Instead, in the case of Ukraine, the importance of respect for international law and states' sovereignty has been constantly downplayed and flexibly framed, with recent developments confirming further that for Chinese leadership, values such as territorial integrity, international law, and the protection of civilians are expendable in this case. Narratives on Ukraine have also not provided any practical policy suggestions on how to reconcile Ukrainian and Russian positions.

The existence of the above-mentioned competing system and policy strategic narratives may suggest that Beijing is intentionally adapting its messages along the lines of adaptative pragmatism. This assessment aligns with Zeng's [17] core argument that the Chinese leadership often introduces catchy slogans, such as the GSI, which are vaguely defined and only gradually acquire their full meaning and substance through further elaboration by China's policy and academic community. Nevertheless, the inability to cultivate clear, consistent, and coherent narratives may dilute message credibility and erode international trust in China's foreign policy commitments. While Chinese narratives seem to get more traction in the Global South and among countries critical of US/Western foreign policy, they are often met with criticism in the West (for example, [107, 108]).

In this regard, the case in Ukraine offers clear evidence of the limitations of strategic ambiguity. Indeed, China's balancing act and Beijing's implicit support for Moscow have exacerbated tensions with Brussels and with key EU member states [109], as exemplified by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's assertion that “there cannot be business as usual” (as quoted by [109], p. 560). Although some in Beijing may have expected Trump's tariffs policy to drive Europe closer to China, ongoing EU-China economic competition and China's perceived enabling role in

³ Only after two years since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has China, along with Brazil, called for an international conference by both Russia and Ukraine to discuss proposals to halt the war.

Russia's war against Ukraine continue to obstruct a meaningful reset in relations. Preliminary evidence also suggests that despite China's narrative on the Gaza war being strongly resonant among Arab states, highlighted *inter alia* by joint declarations, its silence on Iran remains problematic for the Gulf monarchies, which still consider Tehran a significant threat [110].

Conclusively, although strategic narratives are certainly not forecasting tools [11], they are helpful for assessing the direction of Chinese foreign and security policy. In this regard, the above empirical analysis of Chinese official narratives reveals some degree of uncertainty with respect to China's future intentions, as it has yet to articulate a clear vision for the transformation of the international system and policy responses to address current security crises [13]. Simultaneously, the findings suggest that ongoing IR debates about China's position in global politics should transcend the binary categorization of China as either a revisionist or status quo power, which oversimplifies the complexity and multifaceted nature of China's foreign policy. As argued above, China's ambiguity is not necessarily detrimental since it "enables Chinese political leaders to flexibly utilize these narratives in pursuit of their external policy objectives" ([111], p. 7); this ambiguity gives Beijing room to adapt its messages across different interests, issues, and audiences may not be inherently problematic. The existence of competing strategic system and policy narratives leads to a certain degree of confusion in China's international communication, potentially hindering China's ability to shape global security governance and to advance a coherent "post-Western" international order led by China [108]. Indeed, as noted by leading Chinese scholar Yan [112], in order to replace the US-led order, China will need to develop a moral authority, a process that requires it to formulate and defend an ideology consistently in order to attract followers and persuade them to accept its vision for a new international order.

That said, the above comparative study may also offer an interesting contribution for current debates on world system transition. According to Attinà, in a transitional phase of world order, one might expect "new collective action problems and political projects to be put forward by powerful revisionist states pushing for the formation of a coalition that challenges the status quo coalition defending the international order" ([16], p. 118). Yet, as China struggles to configure a unified formula and political project, the transition phase of world order seems to be in its very early stages.

Appendix

Authors' Contributions Angela Pennisi di Floristella solely designed the study, conducted the research, and wrote and finalized the manuscript. The author has reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding Open Access funding provided by the University of Malta. This research received no external funding.

Data Availability The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Competing interests The author declares that there are not known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this research paper.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate This research fully aligns with the ethics procedures of the University of Malta. As the study did not involve the collection of data from human participants, ethics approval, informed consent, and consent for publication from participants were not applicable.

Consent for Publication Not applicable.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

1. Blanchard, J. M. F. 2017. Probing China's twenty-first-century maritime silk road initiative (MSRI): An examination of MSRI narratives. *Geopolitics* 22 (2): 246–268.
2. Lams, L. 2018. Examining strategic narratives in Chinese official discourse under Xi Jinping. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23 (3): 387–411. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-018-9529-8>.
3. Chan, E. S. Y. 2025. China's perspective on the international maritime order. *Chinese Political Science Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-025-00313-2>.
4. Chen, Y. A. 2025. Organizing for ontological security: Rethinking authoritarian international organizations. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 30: 241–265
5. Yun, H. 2025. China's data sovereignty and security: Implications for global digital borders and governance. *Chinese Political Science Review* 10:178–203. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-024-00269-9>.
6. Hu, H. 2025. Analyzing and strategizing the belt and road initiative discourse on twitter: A topic mining and social network approach. *Chinese Political Science Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-024-00276-w>.
7. Klenk, E., and J. Gurol. 2024. The role of narratives for gaining domestic political legitimacy: China's image management during COVID-19. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 29:337–359. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-023-09865-z>.
8. Liao, N. 2017. The power of strategic narratives: The communicative dynamics of Chinese nationalism and foreign relations. In *Forging the world: Strategic narratives and international relations*, ed. A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin, and L. Roselle, 110–133. University of Michigan Press.
9. Hinck, R., et al. 2018. Geopolitical dimensions of “the China dream”: Exploring strategic narratives of the Chinese Communist Party. *China Media Research* 14 (3): 99–111.
10. Manantan, M.B. 2021. Unleash the dragon. *The Cyber Defense Review* 6 (2): 71–90.
11. Wallis, J., et al. 2023. Ordering the islands? Pacific responses to China's strategic narratives. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16 (4): 457–481.
12. Ba, A.D. 2019. China's “belt and road” in Southeast Asia: Constructing the strategic narrative in Singapore. *Asian Perspective* 43 (2): 249–272.
13. Pennisi di Floristella, A., and X. Chen. 2023. Strategic narratives of Russia's war in Ukraine: Perspectives from China. *Policy Studies* 45 (3–4): 573–594. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2023.2276116>.
14. Rogers, R., and X. Zhang. 2024. The Russia–Ukraine war in Chinese social media: LLM analysis yields a bias toward neutrality. *Social Media + Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241254379>.

15. Zhou, W.W., and M. Repnikova. 2024. Different shades of nationalism: Unpacking Chinese online narratives about the Russia–Ukraine War. *The China Journal* 92 (1): 42–70.
16. Attinà, F. 2022. The EU on the road to Damascus: The war in Ukraine and the world order in transition. *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 22 (2): 115–129.
17. Zeng, J. 2020. *Slogan politics: Understanding Chinese foreign policy concepts*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
18. Li, R. 2019. Contending narratives of the international order: US/Chinese discursive power and its effects on the UK. *Asian Perspective* 43 (2): 349–385.
19. Murphy, D. C. 2022. *China's rise in the global south: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's alternative world order*. Stanford University Press.
20. Yang, Y.E. 2021. China's strategic narratives in global governance reform under Xi Jinping. *Journal of Contemporary China* 30 (128): 299–313.
21. Zhang, Y., and J. Orbie. 2021. Strategic narratives in China's climate policy: Analysing three phases in China's discourse coalition. *The Pacific Review* 34 (1): 1–28.
22. Allison, G. 2017. *Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides's trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
23. Goldstein, A. 2007. Power transitions, institutions, and China's rise in East Asia: Theoretical expectations and evidence. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30 (4–5): 639–682.
24. Abu-Haltam, D. 2025. Where to throw the hook? Chinese strategic partnership selection and its effectiveness in achieving influence. *Chinese Political Science Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-025-00297-z>.
25. Mearsheimer, J. 2001. *The tragedy of great power politics*. New York: Norton.
26. Tammen, R.L., and J. Kugler. 2006. Power transition and China–US conflicts. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 1 (1): 35–55.
27. Foot, R. 2006. Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order: Accommodating and hedging. *International Affairs* 82 (1): 77–94.
28. Johnston, A. I. 2003. Is China a status quo power? *International Security* 27 (4): 5–56.
29. Bijian, Z. 2015. China's "peaceful rise" to great-power status. *Foreign Affairs* 84 (5): 18–24.
30. Jacques, M. 2009. *When China rules the world: The end of the Western world and the birth of a new global order*. London: Penguin.
31. Miskimmon, A., and B. O'Loughlin. 2017. Russia's narratives of global order: Great power legacies in a polycentric world. *Politics and Governance* 5 (3): 111–120.
32. Miskimmon, A., B. O' Loughlin, and L. Roselle. 2013. *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*. New York: Routledge.
33. Hammack, P. L., and A. Pilecki. 2014. Methodological approaches in political psychology: Discourse and narrative. In *The Palgrave handbook of global political psychology*, ed. P. Nesbitt-Larking, C. Kinnvall, T. Capelos, and H. Dekker, 72–89. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
34. Ashworth, L. M. 2015. Taking narratives seriously ... taking history seriously? *Critical Studies on Security* 3 (3): 321–322.
35. van Hulst, M., et al. 2025. Discourse, framing and narrative: Three ways of doing critical, interpretive policy analysis. *Critical Policy Studies* 19 (1): 74–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2024.2326936>.
36. Phillips, N., and C. Hardy. 2002. *Discourse analysis: Investigating processes of social construction*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.
37. Fairclough, N. 1992. *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity.
38. Chang, Y.Y. 2021. The post-pandemic world: Between constitutionalized and authoritarian orders—China's narrative-power play in the pandemic era. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26 (1): 27–65.
39. Jones, M.D., and M.K. McBeth. 2010. A narrative policy framework: Clear enough to be wrong? *Policy Studies Journal* 38 (2): 329–353.
40. Autesserre, S. 2012. Dangerous tales: Dominant narratives on the Congo and their unintended consequences. *African Affairs* 111 (443): 202–222. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adr080>.
41. Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon.
42. Menegazzi, S. 2018. *Rethinking think tanks in contemporary China*. Springer.
43. Roselle, L., A. Miskimmon, and B. O'Loughlin. 2014. Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power. *Media, War & Conflict* 7 (1): 70–84.

44. Wellings, B., et al. 2017. Narrative alignment and misalignment: NATO as a global actor as seen from Australia and New Zealand. *Asian Security* 14 (1): 4–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2017.1361731>.
45. Schmitt, O. 2018. When are strategic narratives effective? The shaping of political discourse through the interaction between political myths and strategic narratives. *Contemporary Security Policy* 39 (4): 487–511.
46. Van Noort, C. 2017. Study of strategic narratives: The case of BRICS. *Politics and Governance* 5 (3): 121–129.
47. Ringsmose, J., and B.K. Børgesen. 2011. Shaping public attitudes towards the deployment of military power: NATO, Afghanistan and the use of strategic narratives. *European Security* 20 (4): 505–528.
48. Huang, W. 2015. From reservation to ambiguity: Academic debates and China's diplomatic strategy under Hu's leadership. *East Asia* 32:67–81.
49. Xu, Y., and X. Zhao. 2025. China's discursive strategic neutrality position in the Russo-Ukrainian war: Insights from China's strategic narratives. *Journal of Contemporary China*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2025.2479019>.
50. Braga, P., and K. Sangar. 2020. Strategy amidst ambiguity: The belt and road and China's foreign policy approach to Eurasia. *The Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues/La Revue de dialogues inter-régionaux* <https://popups.uliege.be/2593-9483/index.php?id=132>.
51. De Graaf, B., G. Dimitriu, and J. Ringsmose, eds. 2015. *Strategic narratives, public opinion and war: Winning domestic support for the afghan war*. Routledge.
52. Miskimmon, A., B. O'Loughlin, and L. Roselle. 2024. Strategic narratives, soft power, and foreign policy. In *The Oxford handbook of foreign policy analysis*, ed. J. Kaarbo and C. Theis, 445–461. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
53. Burton, G. 2021. China and the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. In *Routledge handbook on China–Middle East relations*, ed. J. Fulton, 368–383. Routledge.
54. Yellinek, R. 2021. Israel and China: Past distance, present cooperation, uncertain future. In *Routledge handbook on China–Middle East relations*, ed. J. Fulton, 181–191. Routledge.
55. Ullah, A., and L. Xinlei. 2025. Great power divergence: Military primacy versus economic engagement in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A theoretical reexamination of realist paradigms. *Chinese Political Science Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-025-00287-1>.
56. Sun, D. 2021. China's partnership diplomacy in the Middle East. In *Routledge handbook on China–Middle East relations*, ed. J. Fulton, 299–311. Routledge.
57. Jakóbcowski, J., and K. Nieczypor. 2021. Under the radar of big politics: Cooperation between China and Ukraine. *OSW Commentary* 395.
58. Méndez, A., F.J. Forcadell, and K. Horiachko. 2022. Russia–Ukraine crisis: China's Belt Road Initiative at the crossroads. *Asian Business & Management* 21: 488–496. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41291-022-00195-1>.
59. Lanteigne, M. 2021. *Chinese foreign policy: An introduction*. Routledge.
60. Reuters. 2022. China's business and economic interests in Ukraine. February 23.
61. Baker, P. 2006. *Using corpora in discourse analysis*. London: Continuum.
62. Hardt-Mautner, G. 1995. "Only connect.": *Critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics*. Lancaster: UCREL <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/papers/techpaper/vol6.pdf>.
63. Onanuga, P. A., and J. Schmied. 2022. Policing sexuality? Corpus linguistic perspectives to "government" in homosexuality narratives on Nigerian twitter. *Journal of Gender Studies* 31 (7): 825–839.
64. Pollach, I. 2012. Taming textual data: The contribution of corpus linguistics to computer-aided text analysis. *Organizational Research Methods* 15 (2): 263–287.
65. Szudarski, P. 2017. *Corpus linguistics for vocabulary: A guide for research*. Routledge.
66. Stubbs, M. 2004. Language corpora. In *The handbook of applied linguistics*, ed. A. Davies and C. Elder, 106–132. Oxford: Blackwell.
67. Mautner, G. 2007. Mining large corpora for social information: The case of elderly. *Language in Society* 36 (1): 51–72.
68. Baker, P., et al. 2008. A useful methodological synergy? Combining critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to examine discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK press. *Discourse and Society* 19 (3): 273–306.
69. Higuchi, K. 2016. A two-step approach to quantitative content analysis: KH coder tutorial using Anne of green gables (part I). *Ritsumeikan Social Science Review* 52 (1): 77–91.

70. The Diplomat. 2023. How China–Israel economic ties factor into Beijing’s approach to the Gaza war. 24 October. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/how-china-israel-economic-ties-factor-into-beijings-a-approach-to-the-gaza-war/>
71. Danish Institute for International Studies. 2022. The economic meaning of the Russia-Ukraine war for China. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/the-economic-meaning-of-the-russia-ukraine-war-china>.
72. Bo, H. 2023. Implications of the Ukraine war for China: Can China survive secondary sanctions? *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies* 21 (2): 311–322.
73. US Department of Defense. 2024. U.S. security cooperation with Ukraine. 12 December. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/>
74. Council on Foreign Relations. 2024. U.S. aid to Israel in four charts. 13 November. <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-aid-israel-four-charts>
75. MFA. 2022a. *Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s regular press conference on March*. Vol. 17, 2022 https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347244.html.
76. MFA. 2022b. *Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s regular press conference on April 11, 2022*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347260.html
77. MFA. 2022c. *Wang Yi speaks with Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov on the phone, 24 Feb 2022*. http://is.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgwj/202202/t20220224_10645257.htm
78. MFA. 2022d. *Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s regular press conference on July 21, 2022*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347329.html
79. MFA. 2022e. *Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s regular press conference on February 16, 2022*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347225.html
80. MFA. 2022f. *Wang Yi gives an interview to the Chinese central media on attending the LMC foreign ministers’ meeting and the G20 foreign ministers’ meeting, 15 July*. http://gr.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202207/t20220716_10722418.htm
81. MFA. 2022g. *Wang Yi speaks with Dutch deputy prime minister and foreign minister Wopke Hoekstra on the phone, 16 March*. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjzbzd/202203/t20220316_10652186.html
82. US-China Embassy. 2022. *Ambassador Qin gang publishes an article entitled “the Ukraine crisis and its aftermath” on the national interest*. 18 April.
83. MFA. 2022h. *Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s regular press conference on April 12, 2022*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347261.html
84. MFA. 2022i. *Wang Yi expounds China’s five-point position on the current Ukraine issue, 26 February 2022*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjzbzd/202202/t20220226_10645855.html
85. MFA. 2022j. *President xi Jinping holds a virtual summit with leaders of France and Germany, 8 March 2022*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2020zt/kjgzbdffyq/202203/t20220308_10649839.html
86. MFA. 2022k. *Wang Yi speaks with German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock on the phone, 27 February 2022*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjzbzd/202202/t20220227_10645996.html
87. MFA. 2023a. *Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s regular press conference on November 7, 2023*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347630.html
88. MFA. 2023b. *Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning’s regular press conference on October 24, 2023*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347620.html
89. MFA. 2023c. *Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning’s regular press conference on October 26, 2023*. http://jm.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/wjbfyrth/202310/t20231026_11168937.htm
90. MFA. 2023d. *Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s regular press conference on November 2, 2023*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347627.html
91. MFA. 2024a. *Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s regular press conference on 15 May 2024*. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347756.html
92. MFA. 2024b. *Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, elaborated on China’s position on the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, 7 March 2024*.
93. MFA. 2023g. *Position paper of the People’s Republic of China on resolving the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, 30 November*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367506.html
94. MFA. 2024c. *Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning’s regular press conference on February 19, 2024*. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347698.html
95. MFA. 2023f. *MFA Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning’s regular press conference on October 27, 2023* https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zy/jj/diaodao_665718/mn/202310/t20231027_11169684.html.

96. MFA. 2024d. Foreign ministry spokesperson's remarks on Iran's military strike on Israeli territory, 14 April 2024. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/fyrbt/202405/t20240530_11349837.html
97. MFA. 2024e. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin's regular press conference on February 1, 2024. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347692.html
98. MFA. 2024f. Written interview with Al Jazeera media network by foreign minister Wang Yi, 26 April 2024. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/xybfs_663590/xwlb_663592/202404/t20240426_11289693.html
99. Euractiv. 2024. China's xi calls for Middle East peace conference. 30 May. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/chinas-xi-calls-for-middle-east-peace-conference/>
100. MFA. 2024g. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin's regular press conference on April 23, 2024. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347743.html
101. MFA. 2024h. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian's regular press conference on April 19, 2024 https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347741.html.
102. MFA. 2024i. Self-confidence and self-reliance, openness and inclusiveness, fairness and justice, and win-win cooperation. Address by H.E. Wang Yi at the Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations, Beijing, January 9, 2024. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyjh/202405/t20240530_11332624.html
103. MFA. 2023h. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning's regular press conference on October 19, 2023. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347617.html
104. The Diplomat. 2025. China's position on Russia and Ukraine is a warning to the west and the Pacific. 17 July. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/07/chinas-position-on-russia-and-ukraine-is-a-warning-to-the-west-and-the-pacific/>
105. Colley, C. K. 2021. Strategic convergence or strategic rivalry? China and America in the Middle East. In *Routledge Handbook on China–Middle East Relations*, ed. J. Fulton, 61–77. Routledge.
106. Council on Foreign Relations. 2025. China–Russia–Ukraine: May 2025. 7 July. <https://www.cfr.org/article/china-russia-ukraine-may-2025>
107. Leonard, M. 2024. *China's Game in Gaza*. Foreign Affairs 8 January.
108. Nadkarni, V., et al. 2024. The Russia–Ukraine war and reactions from the Global South. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 17 (4): 449–489.
109. Hennessy, A. 2023. The impact of Russia's war against Ukraine on Sino-European relations. *Journal of European Integration* 45 (3): 559–575. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2201497>.
110. The Diplomat. 2024. Is it too late for China's Israel policy? 18 October. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/10/is-it-too-late-for-chinas-israel-policy/>.
111. Yoshimatsu, H. 2024. Examining China and Japan's narratives as diplomatic tools: Competitive nature and international influence. *Journal of Contemporary China*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2352760>.
112. Yan, X. 2019. *Leadership and the rise of great powers*. Vol. 1. Princeton University Press.
113. International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2024. Contesting the West: China's Middle East strategy. 25 June. <https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/06/contesting-the-west-chinas-middle-east-strategy/>
114. MFA. 2023e. Xi Jinping attends the Extraordinary Joint Meeting of BRICS leaders and leaders of invited BRICS members on the situation in the Middle East with particular reference to Gaza, 22 November 2023. http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202312/t20231222_11209832.htm
115. Woods, D. 2025. A Stackelberg model of China's rare earths strategic lead. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-025-09921-w>.
116. Zhang, Y., Y. Wang, and G. Yang. 2025. Global games, local trust: The political dividend of Olympic participation in China. *Chinese Political Science Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-025-00304-3>.

Angela Pennisi di Floristella is Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations at the University of Malta.