

On February 22, 2024, the international round table “Ukrainian factor in Chinese strategy: two years since the Russian invasion” was held at the Ukrainian platform for Contemporary China.

The organizers: A. Krymskyi Institute of Oriental Studies NAS of Ukraine, the National Institute of Strategic Studies, the Ukrainian Association of Sinologists, Sinica podcast, and the Publishing House “Helvetica.”

The speakers: Vita Golod (Ukraine), Lu Xiaoyu (China), Klaus Larres (USA), Bartosz Kowalski (Poland). The event was moderated by Kaiser Kuo, host and co-founder of the Sinica Podcast.

Kaiser Kuo introduced the event, which was dedicated to the second anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The main discussion focused on the Chinese mediating role in this conflict, China’s view on this war, and how the Ukrainian factor influenced China’s foreign strategy, including rapprochement with Russia and relations with the EU and the U.S.

Vita Golod stressed that Ukraine has found itself in a geopolitically complicated situation, caught between the interests and ambitions of multiple superpowers. China sees Ukraine as a proxy war with the United States, not taking the Ukrainian side. We can see a common strategy for China in delicate geopolitical situations: distancing itself from sensitive questions, not deeply involving itself in negotiations, and pushing the sides to a peaceful resolution.

This year in Munich we’ve seen wide media coverage, including a big delegation of Chinese journalists and think tankers. Fenix Media interviewed Mr. Kuleba, our minister of foreign affairs. Mr. Kuleba met his Chinese colleague Wang Yi, which was significant for Ukraine-Chinese relations. Since the start of the full-scale war, the number of high-level meetings was limited, even the Ukrainian politicians and diplomats worked hard to maintain a constant dialogue with China. This time Mr. Kuleba invited the Chinese side to participate in the peace summit in Switzerland. At the Munich conference, Wang Yi stressed that China doesn’t supply lethal weapons to Russia, and also maintains a stance against the use of nuclear weapons. It could be considered as a deterrent factor, influencing Russia. However, Ukraine needs security guarantees, while it’s not a NATO member.

Vita emphasized that President Zelensky still wants to see China sitting at the same table with other countries, and explained her point of view that Ukraine is trying to keep the balance and avoid the worst-case scenario.

Bartosz Kowalski noticed that China’s narrative at this and last year’s Munich security conference hasn’t changed. China hasn’t taken any meaningful steps to resolve the situation in Ukraine. Bartosz mentioned, that in Munich the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland Sikorski appealed to China to restrict Russia and stop the war. According to the Polish scholar, the only way to stop Russian advancement is to cut down the trade between China and Russia, and the Western secondary sanctions are preventing this economic rapprochement. Bartosz said, that China is interested in maintaining the status quo because of the economic benefits, and also for keeping Putin in power. Chinese actions toward Ukraine or Russia are only a matter of interpretation.

Klaus Larres said that China wouldn’t take the decisive initiative to stop this war. At the beginning of the invasion, the Chinese mediating role seemed more realistic than now.

According to Klaus, the EU has leverage over China to encourage a more constructive role. Chinese are taking advantage of the conflict, and the U.S. is more distressed and distracted by other conflicts around the world and domestic affairs. The San Francisco summit was useful for relaxing U.S. relations with China. China views the world realistically, not through the lens of human rights or humanitarian perspectives. And geopolitical situation is now favoring China.

Lu Xiaoyu described the initial impression of China at the onset of the war in Ukraine as shocking, and the Chinese decision-makers weren't ready for the Russian war against Ukraine, which put China in an awkward position. This explains why China didn't react during the first year of the big war until February 2023, but then slowly adjusted its policy toward the conflict about Ukraine. Xiaoyu emphasized that there is a misunderstanding of China's impact on Russia. He called for unrealistic expectations of European partners that China can influence Russian decision-makers. The intellectual community in China maintained a stable perspective on the war in Ukraine throughout the two years of the Russian invasion. However, public opinion in China is highly polarized. Xiaoyu mentioned that he visited Ukraine last year and participated in many discussions in China upon return.

Vita Golod observed that since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, all interactions between Ukrainian and Chinese analytical groups have been terminated. It's important to rebuild these relations for a better understanding of the situation from both sides. Vita mentioned the latest Ukrainian opinion poll, where 58% of Ukrainians see China as a hostile country, compared to 34% in July 2023. She emphasized that most of the Ukrainian media would never portray China's position as neutral; rather, they would characterize the Chinese position as pro-Russian. Vita stated that Ukrainians need solutions, highlighting that both the 12-point China's Position Document and the "peace formula" offered by Ukrainian President Zelensky share some commonalities. These include warnings against the use of nuclear weapons, protection of food security, safeguarding civilians and prisoners of war by international humanitarian law, and supporting the exchange of prisoners of war between parties. Vita mentioned that dialogue between Ukraine and China for funding a common group is mostly blocked by the Chinese side. She suggested that a trilateral format for discussing urgent needs between the U.S., China, and Ukraine or the EU, China, and Ukraine could be effective.

Klaus Larress emphasized that after two years since the start of the full-scale invasion, all countries have acknowledged what happened in Ukraine, regardless of their initial reactions. China is economically supporting Russia, thereby undermining the efforts of Western countries to halt the Russian war. According to Klaus, sanctions don't help to engage China in participating more actively in peace talks and acting more responsibly.

Lu Xiaoyu explained the 12-point Chinese positioned document as a demonstration of basic norms about the conflict, including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. This document provides China with flexibility toward all parties involved in the conflict, signaling to the international community that China is taking action. Xiaoyu observed that China's foreign policy is currently shifting, but the primary focus remains on neighboring countries and the U.S. Xiaoyu reminded that China's economic leverage cannot necessarily be translated into political influence, as one of China's key principles is non-interference in internal affairs. The only

exception to this might be in disputes concerning China's domestic politics, such as the Taiwan issue. So, there wouldn't be any fundamental change in China's policy any time soon.

Vita Golod added that there were high expectations that China could help to restore the Black Sea Grain Initiative, but it didn't happen. Currently, Ukrainian logistics are almost blocked. However, Ukraine continues to produce and supply to the global market. Despite losing almost 40% of our trade turnover with China, China remains Ukraine's key trade partner. Vita emphasized that U.S.-China relations are the most consequential for other countries, including Ukraine. Both Great Powers need to find common ground. Vita emphasized that Ukrainian territories could not be a point of compromise.

Bartosz Kowalski mentioned that political uncertainty in the U.S. is shifting the EU's political and economic environment, which could push the EU to seek compromises with China. The current trade between the EU and China is developing with elements of protectionism. The EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy from the U.S., which aligns with China's interests, might become a reality. Bartosz noted that President Macron gave an example of Serbia as a country that maintains a balance between its relations with the EU and China. According to Bartosz Ukraine is unlikely to agree to a frozen conflict, as it would perpetuate security uncertainty throughout Europe.

Klaus Larress noted that from the very beginning, the Biden administration attempted to foster Transatlantic unity. The Russian invasion helped accelerate this process and will likely keep EU countries together as long as they perceive Russia as a threat. Only two countries could be considered as outliers – Hungary and Turkey. Klaus said that a frozen conflict is not a solution because Putin cannot be trusted. He suggested that the international community, including China, could play a bigger role, for example, by involving UN police forces.

Lu Xiaoyu shared his observation that China and the EU have a perception gap in terms of strategic autonomy. China sees it only as security autonomy from the U.S. However, the EU considers strategic autonomy at three levels: energy, security, and economic. The elections in the U.S. will determine the EU's future security policy, but also will influence the security architecture in Asia. Xiaoyu expressed his opinion that with the support of the EU and possibly China, the sides could agree to freeze the conflict at least until the outcome of the U.S. elections. Xiaoyu shared his impressions after the meeting with President Zelensky. He noted a realistic evaluation of China's position from the Ukrainian official side. Three recommendations were made to China: openly respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, refrain from using nuclear weapons, and refrain from selling lethal weapons to Russia. Xiaoyu emphasized that, based on his observations, China follows these recommendations.