



**Dimensions**  
for Strategic Studies

Analytical report

## How Could China Capitalize on Ukrainian Conflict in Advancing a Multipolar World?

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# Contents

Contents: .....	3
Executive Summary: .....	4
Preamble: .....	5
China Amidst the Russia-Ukraine War: .....	9
Enhancing China's International Stance: Moving Towards Multipolarity: .....	12
Harnessing Economic Dynamics as the Catalyst: .....	12
Innovative International Initiatives and Concepts as the Foundations of .....	12
a New Global Order: .....	12
The Ukrainian War and Russia's Pivot Toward the Chinese Embrace: .....	15
China's Growing Influence in the Middle East and Africa: .....	16
Conclusion: .....	19



### **Executive Summary:**

In the intricate dance of geopolitics, the Ukrainian conflict's reverberations have sent ripples far beyond its borders. This paper embarks on a journey to explore the shadows this war casts upon China's ambitious roadmap towards global prominence. As the world's eyes are fixed on Eastern Europe, China maneuvers with finesse, weaving a tapestry of strengthened ties with Russia—savoring the advantage of cheaper oil imports in the wake of the sanctions Russia faces. Yet, this isn't merely a tale of commerce. China, akin to a seasoned diplomat, attempts to bridge the chasm between Russia and Ukraine, painting itself as a peacemaker. The narrative further delves into China's grand design, pillars that hold its aspirations to mold a world of many epicenters. And as Russia's footsteps fade in regions like the Middle East and Africa, the paper highlights China's artful move to fill those voids, expanding its sphere and imprinting its influence.

### **Key words:**

China, Russia, Ukraine, Russia-Ukraine War, multipolar world order, BRICS



## PREAMBLE

Caught in the crossfire of geopolitics, China found itself in a complex quandary as tensions escalated between Russia and Ukraine. Russia, a stalwart ally of China, shares not just deep-rooted economic ties but also a profound diplomatic camaraderie with the East Asian giant. A testament to this bond was evident when President Xi Jinping, during the Shanghai Trade Forum on July 4, 2023, emphasized unwavering support for Moscow's foundational interests<sup>(1)</sup>. Contrastingly, Ukraine, while not as strategically aligned as Russia, holds significant economic value for China. Seen as the Eastern doorway to the vast European markets, Ukraine is pivotal in China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, serving as a linchpin in the grand Eurasian transport corridor. As such, navigating the turbulent waters of the Russia-Ukraine conflict presented China with a diplomatic tightrope walk, balancing strategic partnerships with vital economic interests.<sup>(2)</sup>

During the recent Shanghai summit held on July 4th, 2023, the Chinese president emphasized that China and Russia "will continue to provide unwavering support to each other on issues related to their core interests and enhance cooperation in multilateral forums." The visit of the Russian Prime Minister stood out as the highest-level visit from Russian officials to China since the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Underscoring the depth of the ties between the two nations, the Russian Prime Minister, following the grand reception held for him outside the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, stated that the relationship between the two countries has reached an unprecedented and elevated level.

(1) Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit: Putin says: Sanctions will make Russia stronger. Vikas Pandey, BBC News, July 4, 2023, [Link](#).

(2) Expectations of Russian-Chinese relations in the "post-Ukrainian war" world, Raed Jabr, Al-Sharq, August 21, 2022, [Link](#)



Characterized by mutual respect and a joint desire to respond collaboratively to crises and challenges arising from increasing global turbulence, including illegitimate sanctions imposed by the West<sup>(3)</sup>.

The burgeoning relationship between Russia and China is rooted in a pragmatic foundation built on mutual interests. In recent times, Russia has emerged as China's largest trading partner. According to data from the Chinese Customs Department, trade between the two nations reached an equivalent of \$190 billion in 2022. By 2023, the bilateral trade volume has already touched \$70 billion, marking an increase of over 40% compared to the previous year<sup>(4)</sup>.

This uptick in relations came on the heels of a comprehensive strategic partnership inked by the Chinese and Russian sides in February 2022. At its core, this agreement aims to counterbalance American influence. While China's views do not align completely with Russia's, Beijing offers implicit support based on its rivalry and animosity towards the West. From the Chinese perspective, any move that weakens the West is advantageous for China. However, what's noteworthy is Beijing's neutrality in this conflict. It didn't stand by Russia when the United Nations passed a resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Although China refrains from condemning Russia for its actions against Ukraine, it has called for de-escalation, urging both sides to maintain calm and restraint<sup>(5)</sup>.

While China isn't directly involved in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, the unfolding events and potential outcomes of this war are undeniably concerning for Beijing. This concern stems from China's anticipation that the war's repercussions might impede its ascent on the global stage. China has been strategically working to sculpt a new multipolar world order where it stands as a primary, influential pillar. This strategic vision underscores China's mediation efforts.

(3) To deepen relations<sup>3</sup>: Russian Prime Minister visits China and calls for increasing trade between the two countries, Euronews, May 23, 2023. [Link](#).

(4) Russia and China are “an alliance that eliminates mountains” and the European Union provides 220,000 artillery shells to Kiev, Euronews, May 24, 2023, [Link](#).

(5) China's neutral position towards its ally Russia in the United Nations. Questions and answers, Al Hurra, March 3, 2023. [Link](#).



Operating under the premise of impartiality, China aims to mediate between the warring sides. Its aptitude for mediation was recently exemplified in the Saudi-Iranian tensions, where China managed to bridge the chasm between two nations that appeared to be on the verge of becoming arch-nemeses<sup>(6)</sup>.

The graph in Figure (1) illustrates the growth trajectory of trade between Russia and China from 2015 through 2022, after the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the subsequent sanctions imposed on Russia. Meanwhile, Figure (2) presents the destinations of Russian exports up to November 2022, highlighting the significant volume directed towards China<sup>(7)</sup>.

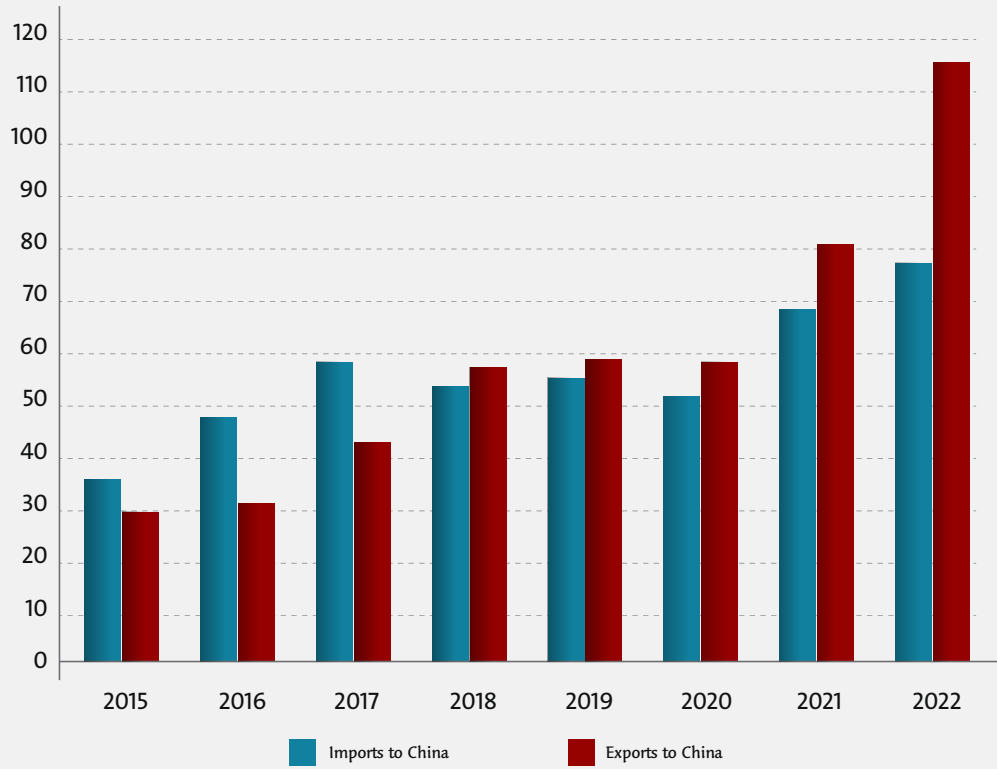
(6) The Chinese position on the Russian-Ukrainian war: its backgrounds and calculations, Abdul Qader Dandan, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, August 3, 2023. [Link](#).

(7) Russia and Ukraine: Will China support Moscow during the war? BBC, February 21 2023. [Link](#) .



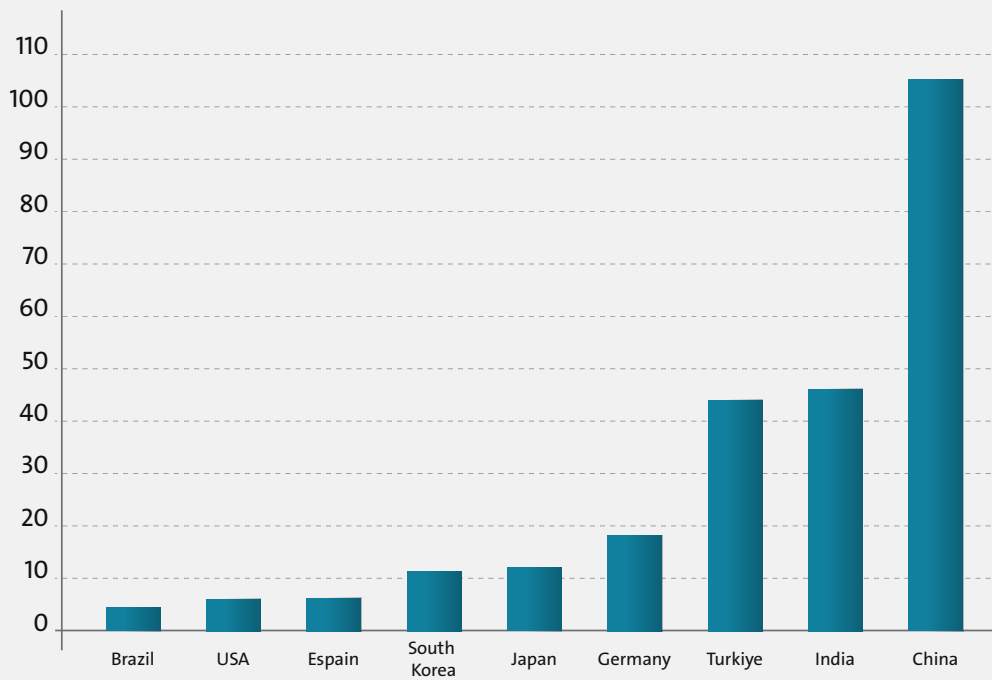
### Growth of trade exchange between Russia and China

Source: BBC



### The largest importers of Russian products

Source: BBC







## CHINA AMIDST THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR:

China treads a fine line regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war, navigating a delicate and intricate path in its approach to the issue. It's a strategy in which China excels, known for its attempts to appease all parties and achieve a consensus with all stakeholders based on a meticulous balance that few nations other than China can achieve. Alongside this, China is keen to prevent exacerbating hostilities and disagreements with America and the West, who openly stand with Ukraine against Russia. Furthermore, China aims to position itself as a responsible actor capable of bearing international responsibilities and resolving crises. This not only qualifies China to assume a leadership role in the emerging multipolar world order but also underlines its attempts to secure a peaceful environment. This harmonious atmosphere, promoted in its foreign policy, further facilitates China's peaceful ascent, especially in its economic domain <sup>(8)</sup>.

China's efforts come amid longstanding U.S. pressures, which have historically been a reason for closer ties between China and Russia. Despite U.S. sanctions and the consequential halt of some Chinese companies from working with Russia for fear of facing U.S. penalties, the bilateral relations have remained strong and cohesive. On the flip side of the equation, China does not want to significantly weaken Russia, as such an outcome is not in China's interests. A weakened Russia would make it easier for the West to isolate China, which could undermine China's position on the Taiwan issue—a matter that China cannot afford to compromise on. Therefore, it is in China's interest for Russia to possess power within the sphere of China's influence, without competing or surpassing it, ensuring that China always holds the upper hand.

(8) The Chinese position on the Russian-Ukrainian war: its backgrounds and calculations, Abdul Qader Dandan, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, August 3, 2023. [Link](#).



In the contemporary global landscape, the strategic collaboration between China and Russia hints at the formulation of a potential military alliance. Both countries, feeling encircled by U.S. policies, are being inadvertently pushed by American maneuvers into seeking an alternative global order, free from U.S. dominance. America's persistence in retaining its hegemony and its assertive approach towards its competitors might inadvertently be laying the foundation for this new multipolar world. Evidently, several nations have been keen on aligning with the Sino-Russian axis, amplifying the call for this new paradigm.

Amidst these geopolitical shifts, China, ever the diplomat, has extended an olive branch, offering to mediate between Russia and Ukraine. In February 2023, China proposed 12 negotiation points to both parties, aiming to foster dialogue. These proposals, discussed during a high-level summit in Moscow, received a warm reception from Russia. In contrast, Ukraine exhibited apprehension. Complicating matters further, the U.S. rejected this mediation attempt, and some EU members voiced reservations about specific proposed points. At a subsequent conference in Florence in May 2023, the EU's Foreign Affairs Chief, Josep Borrell, succinctly encapsulated the prevailing sentiment by stating, "Ukraine's peace hinges on one plan—the Zelensky plan. The Chinese proposal, while well-intentioned, lacks the gravitas for serious consideration <sup>(9)</sup>."

This came after Zelensky announced that the "Chinese proposals are nothing more than a statement of ideas." On the other side, Russia rejects Zelensky's plan, presented at the G20 summit in December 2022, which calls for the Russian withdrawal from the Ukrainian territories annexed during the war, in addition to the restitution of the Crimean Peninsula and other conditions that Russia refuses.

(9) China begins very difficult Ukrainian-Russian mediation consultations, Sami Amara, Independent Arab, May 16 2023. [Link](#).



Following this, Russia emphasizes the need for Ukraine to accept the current status quo, abandon its aspirations to join NATO, remain a neutral state, and modify its constitution to prohibit the deployment of strategic weapons within its territory.

Additionally, Russia insists on retaining control over the regions it has captured. It is noteworthy to mention the position of the EU's Foreign Affairs Chief, Josep Borrell, when he stated, "The Ukrainian conflict has re-solidified the transatlantic alliance," and emphasized the importance of "being realistic and working more to support Ukraine's military efforts."<sup>(10)</sup>

For China, it's imperative to stress the importance of the success of its mediation in the negotiation process. The success of such mediation under Chinese sponsorship would bolster China's position, and President Xi Jinping's reputation as a peacemaker, something the U.S. is attempting to thwart by all means. The U.S. has alleged that China is not a neutral mediator and is biased towards Russia. Along with some European countries, the U.S. sought to reject the Chinese initiative. Some observers believe that Western rejection came as a pressure tactic on China to introduce additional conditions to pressurize Moscow<sup>(11)</sup>.

(10) China begins very difficult Ukrainian-Russian mediation consultations, Sami Amara, Independent Arab, May 16, 2023. [Link](#).

(11) China-Russia: From regional rivalry to strengthening relations after the outbreak of war in Ukraine?, Amine Zerouati, France, 24 March 21, 2023. [Link](#).



## ENHANCING CHINA'S INTERNATIONAL STANCE: MOVING TOWARDS MULTIPOLARITY:

### Harnessing Economic Dynamics as the Catalyst:

China's monumental contribution to global growth over the past two decades has reinforced the narrative that the economic future of any country is intrinsically linked to China. This is illustrated by the fact that China accounted for approximately 40% of the total global growth volume.

In this context, China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 marked a pivotal moment regarding its export performance. China has adeptly leveraged the trading system to achieve remarkable milestones in its economic growth trajectory<sup>(12)</sup>.

### Harnessing Economic Dynamics as the Catalyst:

China has introduced a contemporary concept on the international stage known as the 'Community of Common Destiny' This notion facilitates China's emergence as a power advocating for multilateralism and propelling globalization by innovating new concepts in the realm of international relations, such as "Development Diplomacy" and "Empathy Diplomacy." China has institutionalized these ideas by establishing the 'Community of Shared Destiny Organization, aiming to disseminate this ideology institutionally across the world.

(12) China and the rise of a multipolar economic order: What lies ahead?, Stewart Paterson, Hinrich Foundation, September 27, 2022, [Link](#).



China approached the United Nations to pass a resolution acknowledging the importance of global and international entities rallying around the commitment to a shared human destiny. Indeed, China succeeded in obtaining such a resolution from the UN. China's paramount initiative aimed at bolstering this agenda is the Belt and Road Initiative. Accompanying this, China has established parallel financial institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and expanded multilateral organizations led by China, like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization <sup>(13)</sup>.

Turning back to previous years, the Chinese President Xi Jinping's introduction of the term "New Type of Great Power Relations" in February 2012 can be categorized as China's effort to create a new multipolar world order. The goal behind this was to get Washington to recognize the presence of other major powers on the international stage <sup>(14)</sup>.

China's multifaceted and diverse strategic approach in its policy, using various instruments, operates in a coordinated and harmonious manner. Combined, they work towards creating a world that is more conducive to China's interests and aspirations. In February 2023, based on a proposal from President Xi Jinping last April, China's Foreign Ministry issued its conceptual paper on the "Global Security Initiative" (GSI). This paper outlined China's proposed solution to international security challenges. Although this initiative remains somewhat enigmatic, the new security agenda proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party vastly differs in its principles and practices from the agendas of Western powers <sup>(15)</sup>. In this vein, the fruition of Chinese mediation in restoring and fostering understanding between Saudi Arabia and Iran is perceived by China as a tangible manifestation of the Global Security Initiative's (GSI) triumph. This episode is interpreted as a strategic move by China to bestow practical legitimacy upon the proposed security framework.

(13) The concept of common destiny and Arab-Chinese relations: between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Corona pandemic, Heba Jamal, Journal of Politics and Economics . [Link](#).

(14) The concept of common destiny and Arab-Chinese relations: between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Corona pandemic, Heba Jamal, Journal of Politics and Economics 2022. [Link](#).

(15) China ramps up its efforts to shape a multipolar world, Dale Aluf, The China Project, March 31, 2023, [Link](#).



Additionally, China's proposition of establishing a "New Security Structure in the Middle East", prominently highlighted in the GSI security initiative document, emanates from its historical stance of endorsing the Palestinian people's rights and its aspiration to mediate in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

This is also reflective in its pivotal role in dialogues surrounding the Iranian nuclear endeavor. The interweaving of these diplomatic stances and interventions exemplifies China's coherent and integrated approach to international security and diplomacy, potentially redefining the norms and dynamics of international relations<sup>(16)</sup>.

China's Global Development Initiative, presented concurrently with the Global Security Initiative (GSI) and documented in official Chinese statements, has been promoted in multilateral forums. This was followed by the Global Civilizations Initiative recently announced by President Xi Jinping, echoing the tenets of the Global Development Initiative. On another note, China pins its hopes on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as one of its multilateral institutions working to realize the Chinese vision. The state-controlled newspaper, "China Daily," published an article in one of its editions titled: "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization can aid China in building a multipolar world." It's worth noting that this newspaper is a state-run entity and speaks on its behalf<sup>(17)</sup>.

China has been strategically expanding its international influence through key organizations. At the Dushanbe summit in 2022, China spearheaded the incorporation of Iran into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, elevating it to the ninth member. This move was complemented by the acceptance of Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia as dialogue partners, subsequently prompting nations like the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, the Maldives, and Myanmar<sup>(18)</sup> to express interest in joining this cooperative dialogue.

(16) In Implementation of the Global Security Initiative: Establishing a New Security Framework in the Middle East, China-Arab Cooperation Forum, September 22, 2022, [Link](#).

(17) China ramps up its efforts to shape a multipolar world, Dale Aluf, The China Project, March 31, 2023, [Link](#).

(18) China ramps up its efforts to shape a multipolar world, Dale Aluf, The China Project, March 31, 2023, [Link](#).



Simultaneously, China has shown its ambition to bolster the BRICS group, which traditionally includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. With a commitment to fostering peace, security, and an equitable global development, the latest BRICS meeting in Johannesburg in August 2023 saw an expanded participation. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates, and Argentina were notable new attendees. Such strategic inclusivity underscores China's vision for a multipolar world order<sup>(19)</sup>.

### The Ukrainian War and Russia's Pivot Toward the Chinese Embrace:

Underscoring the significance of the Russo-Ukrainian war in setting the stage for a transition to a new multipolar global order, which hinges on betting on the Chinese side, Russian President Vladimir Putin's statement about the end of the era of American dominance and the establishment of a multipolar system came to the fore. This system, steered by new mechanisms, ensures international security. Building a new multipolar world, moving away from the unipolar American dominance, and the principle of respecting state sovereignty while emphasizing non-interference in their internal affairs have all been the foundation for the Sino-Russian partnership on the international stage in recent years.

Russia's strategy of pivoting eastward, adopted as a response to Western sanctions aimed at isolating and encircling Moscow, emerged as a lifeline eagerly seized and optimally leveraged by China. The latter increased its trade volume with Russia, especially in oil and gas, in a manner that serves Chinese interests and strengthens its position. However, this was met with challenges that Beijing found itself ensnared by. Beijing was reluctant to see the crisis prolonged for various reasons, one of which was its desire not to take sides and thereby minimize repercussions on its already strained relations with the United States. China initially believed that the conflict would be short-lived and achieve its objectives in record time. However, events did not unfold according to those expectations<sup>(20)</sup>.

(19) Including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, 6 countries join the BRICS group as of January 2024, France 24, August 24, 2023. [Link](#).

(20) Western sanctions on Russia. Strategic dimensions and implications of failure, Magdy Abdel Hadi, Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed, June 2, 2023. [Link](#).



The strategic partnership between Russia and China, distinct from a formal alliance, has played a pivotal role in ensuring stability in their bilateral relations, particularly during tumultuous periods such as wars. This partnership framework facilitated ongoing cooperation, permitting both nations to maintain their individual policies without imposing them on each other.

When sanctions disrupted the Russian market, leading to the exit of foreign companies, Chinese entrepreneurs adeptly bridged the gap. However, amid this deepening cooperation, Russia harbored reservations. Concerned about shifting its dependency from the West directly to China, especially in economic and investment realms, Russia took precautions. It introduced certain investment restrictions, emphasized the employment of its domestic experts, and prioritized the localization of its production processes. This cautious approach not only safeguarded Russia's economic sovereignty but also underscored the resilience and mutual respect inherent in the Sino-Russian strategic partnership <sup>(21)</sup>.

## China's Growing Influence in the Middle East and Africa:

China's engagement in the Middle East and Africa stands as a pivotal element in its foreign policy. The Russo-Ukrainian war enabled China to establish stronger ties in these regions, primarily through economic partnerships and infrastructure projects. China's economic expansion into the Middle East and Africa is driven by its quest for resources, markets, and geopolitical influence. China heavily invests in building infrastructure projects, such as ports, railways, and energy facilities, providing much-needed developmental capital for conflict-affected countries. By offering financial support and technological expertise, China has managed to secure access to strategic resources, including oil, gas, and minerals, for its burgeoning economy <sup>(22)</sup>.

(21) Expectations of the Russian-Chinese relationship in the “post-Ukrainian war” world, Raed Jabr, Al-Sharq, August 21, 2022. [Link](#).

(22) Washington and China's suffering in the Middle East, Siham Maatallah, Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed, March 31, 2023. [Link](#).





China's expansion of military cooperation with countries in the Middle East and Africa has become another major facet of its strategy. By providing military assistance, training, and equipment, China sought to bolster its security ties in the region. The Russo-Ukrainian conflict created an environment in which crisis-afflicted countries looked for alternative partners to ensure their security.

Under these circumstances, China seized the opportunity to expand its diplomatic mediation activities among countries to resolve lingering conflicts. It also capitalized on enhancing military cooperation agreements, conducting joint exercises, and establishing military bases, effectively showcasing its power and influence in the region. In terms of mediating between nations, China adopted a 'top-down' strategy, in contrast to other nations that often pursue a 'bottom-up' approach. China engaged in high-level meetings involving senior officials and state figures in the foreign ministry and targeted parties, and participated in high-caliber peace conferences. This, alongside shuttle diplomacy and efforts to embed conflict resolution within multilateral institutions, symbolizes China's unique approach <sup>(23)</sup>.

China attempts to market its policy as a harmonious one that contrasts with the confrontational American policy, founded on the concept of "creative chaos". China relies on economic growth, cooperation, and the development of essential infrastructure for prosperity, in collaboration with the de facto regimes and authorities, without intervening in internal affairs, human rights, and democracy issues. These are considered primarily as Western and American tools.

(23) China ramps up its efforts to shape a multipolar world, Dale Aluf, The China Project, March 31, 2023, [Link](#).



The economic growth that China relies on necessitates security, peace, stability, and a cessation of wars and conflicts worldwide. China's task in the Middle East and North Africa will not be easy, given the profound nature of some disputes. However, the exhaustion experienced by the region's nations has given them an incentive to support Chinese initiatives. These countries eagerly seek to rebuild their economies and address the crises hindering their development. This led to China's efforts to incorporate new countries into the BRICS group on the 22nd of August 2023, including Arab nations such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, and Ethiopia. They now convene within an economic cooperation framework capable of fostering a harmonious environment where differences converge for a larger goal: collaboration for development. This, in turn, will facilitate the resolution of lingering crises among these nations <sup>(24)</sup>.

(24) On the strategic partnership between China and Russia, Ammar Diop, Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed, March 26 2023. [Link](#).



## CONCLUSION

At the heart of China's strategy lies its commitment to cultivating cooperative ties with nations and entities that show receptivity, while maintaining a guarded stance towards those that signal hostility. The Russo-Ukrainian conflict has undeniably enhanced China's stature in the international arena, positioning it as a frontrunner in the drive towards a multipolar world order. This geopolitical tremor further paved the way for China's intensified involvement in the Middle East and Africa, most notably its pivotal role in facilitating the Saudi-Iranian accord.

China's adept blending of economic outreach with strategic foreign policy initiatives and savvy diplomatic moves has allowed it to not only navigate, but also capitalize on the geopolitical realignments borne from the conflict.




A linchpin of this strategy is China's unwavering dedication to regional stability, essential for its sustained economic growth and the consequent amplification of its global influence.

China's ascendancy in regions like the Middle East and North Africa signifies more than regional influence; it heralds a shift in global power dynamics. Capitalizing on its vast economic, political, and strategic engagements, China stands at the cusp of challenging the West-dominated unipolar world order, offering an alternative paradigm of development and governance. With its expanding trade footprint, especially in technology sectors, Beijing is adeptly converting its amassed soft power into significant diplomatic leverage. However, the road ahead is not without hurdles: from domestic challenges like its slowing demographic and economic growth to global counter-moves spearheaded by the U.S., and potential developments like the emerging Indo-European corridor.



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