

Although China's official position on the war has been that of neutrality—not aligning with the West against Russia and not directly supporting Russia's war in Ukraine—its communications about the war, in particular its propaganda via state media and Foreign Ministry spokespeople have carried a more pro-Russia stance. During the past two months of the Russia-Ukraine war, Chinese official messaging has echoed and reinforced Russia's position: 1.) by promoting shared narratives about the origins and culprits of the war, namely blaming NATO and the United States; 2.) by drawing disproportionately on Russian sources and footage of the war; and 3.) by under-reporting on Ukraine's perspectives. This pro-Russia leaning during the Ukraine crisis can be understood as part of a larger propaganda trajectory vis-à-vis Russia and the United States. Domestically, China's propaganda messaging in large part appears to resonate with public opinion. Internationally, however, Chinese propaganda about the war, especially communications by Foreign Ministry spokespeople, delude China's neutrality position and antagonize the West, while more integrating China into the Global South.

Russia's war in Ukraine, launched shortly after the Beijing Olympics, presented a significant diplomatic challenge to the Chinese government. On the one hand, the invasion of Ukraine counters China's vocal support for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity in the international system. On the other hand, openly opposing Russia might harm the increasingly important bilateral relationship.¹ In the past two months, China's official foreign-policy response to the war has attempted to stray a middle ground. China's high-ranking officials, including Xi Jinping himself, as well as State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, have called for peace talks and an end to the war.² At the United Nations, China has abstained from two UN resolutions condemning Russia, and has vetoed expulsion of Russia from the UN Human Rights

¹ On February 4, during Putin's visit to Beijing, Xi and Putin signed a joint declaration of friendship with "no limits."

² "China's Xi Calls for 'Maximum Restraint' in Ukraine," Reuters, March 8, 2022, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-xi-calls-maximum-restraint-ukraine-2022-03-08/>; "FM: China Sincerely Wants Peace in Ukraine," Xinhua, April 5, 2022, at http://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/wangyi/202204/05/content_WS624b9affc6d02e5335328c4b.html.

Council.³ Thus far, China has not extended military or economic assistance to Russia and has largely abided by Western sanctions.

Official Chinese propaganda about the war, including state-media reporting and Foreign Ministry communications via its spokesperson on social media, however, has been biased toward Russia. The following analysis discusses these pro-Russia leanings, followed by how China's coverage of the war feeds into larger propaganda patterns and the implications of such pro-Russia messaging for the party's domestic and external legitimacy.

How Chinese Propaganda Aligned with Russia on the Ukraine War

The only publicly accessible propaganda directive about coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war, leaked on March 3, stresses the role of the media to mitigate public sentiment about the conflict. Specifically, it outlaws commercial websites and local and self-media from republishing foreign news articles and conducting livestreams, leaving most of the coverage in the hands of official party outlets. The directive also outlaws any challenge to China's official foreign policy on the conflict, including antagonistic content about China-Russia relations and "harmful viewpoints that support or adulate the United States."⁴

An analysis of official media coverage reveals a consistent trend of sidelining the conflict, along with disproportionately channeling pro-Russia narratives and viewpoints. From the outset of the crisis to this day, the Russia-Ukraine story has been played down in Chinese media coverage. Unlike Western news outlets that have carried the story of the war on its front pages, Chinese state media, such as *Renmin ribao*, have prioritized major domestic news stories, such as China's National People's Congress (NPC) deliberations and now updates to implementation of the zero-Covid policy, amongst other stories. In comparison to Joe Biden's widely televised emotional remarks on Ukraine at the opening of his State of the Union speech, at the two sessions of the NPC Wang Yi only mentioned Ukraine at one press conference.⁵

When covering the war, China's propaganda via state media as well as via official spokespersons has amplified Russia's position in several ways: indirectly, by shifting the blame in the conflict to NATO and the U.S.; and directly by channeling Russia's position on the war and thereby obfuscating its aggression as well as silencing and minimizing any perspectives from Ukraine.

³ Jacob Fromer, "UN Votes to Condemn Russian Invasion of Ukraine, but China Again Stays Silent," *South China Morning Post*, March 3, 2022, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3169010/un-votes-condemn-russian-invasion-ukraine-china-again-stays-silent>; "UN Suspends Russia From Human Rights Body over Ukraine Abuses," *Al Jazeera*, April 7, 2022, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/7/un-to-vote-on-suspending-russia-from-rights-council>

⁴ "Minitrue: Turn Down Temperature, Strictly Control Content of Ukraine Situation," *China Digital Times*, at <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2022/03/minitrue-turn-down-temperature-strictly-control-content-on-ukraine-situation/>

⁵ "王毅谈化解乌克兰危机的四点主张" (Wang Yi Discusses Four Points for the Solution of the Ukraine Crisis), *Xinhua*, March 7, 2022, at http://www.news.cn/2022-03/07/c_1128446483.htm

1. Shifting the blame

An apparent trend in China's propaganda about the war at the very outset of the conflict, but still notable during the later stages, has been the emphasis on NATO, the West, and specifically on the United States as the culprits or instigators behind the crisis. In my analysis of Xinhua News Agency's coverage of the war during the past two months, nearly half of the articles center on critiques of the West. Analysis of the most widely shared state-media posts about the war finds that about one-third of the posts focus on blaming the West.⁶ External propaganda via state media and Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespeople on Twitter has also disproportionately focused on the West and especially on the United States. Research, carried out by the German Marshall Fund, on China's disinformation and propaganda, for instance, finds that the United States is the most mentioned country by Chinese officials in the context of the war. This research uncovers about 366 posts on NATO expansion among China's official accounts during the first four months of 2022, in comparison to only thirty-six posts on the same topic in 2021.⁷

The key narrative across these communications platforms is that the West is responsible for militarizing the region by overexpanding NATO in Eastern Europe and, as such, instigating Russia's military operations in Ukraine. At the outset of the invasion, for instance, Hua Chunying, assistant minister of Foreign Affairs, noted at a press briefing that some countries (alluding to the Western countries) should consider whether they "forced a major country into a dead end," referring to U.S. violations of agreements with Russia and NATO's expansion along Russia's border.⁸ China's state media, including Xinhua News Agency, blamed the United States for "stoking the fire" (拱火) by delivering constant warnings about Putin's military plans and by galvanizing massive weapons delivery to Ukraine. On March 21, for instance, Xinhua News Agency claimed that the U.S. had "triple-gained" (一石三鸟) during the war by "first, propagating Russia's threat to speed up the circling of Russia; second, taking the opportunity to extinguish the "flare" of the European pursuit of strategic autonomy and independent security

⁶ Simone McCarthy and CNN's Beijing Bureau, "China's Promotion of Russian Disinformation Indicates Where Its Loyalties Lie," CNN, March 10, 2022, at <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/10/china/china-russia-disinformation-campaign-ukraine-intl-dst-hnk/index.html>

⁷ Joshua Cartwright and Robert Delaney, "Ukraine War: Data Shows Tighter Convergence of Chinese, Russian Messaging, US Analysts Say," *South China Morning Post*, April 28, 2022, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3175754/ukraine-war-data-shows-tighter-convergence-chinese-russian>

⁸ "华春莹: 北约 5 次东扩至俄家门口, 是否想过把一个大国逼到绝地的后果?" (Hua Chunying: NATO Expands Eastward on Five Occasions to Russia's Door. Has It Thought About the Consequences of Cornering a Great Power?), *Global Times*, February 23, 2022, at <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/46w0eT0bUId>

affairs; and third, by making the American military and defense industry interest groups profiteers from the conflict.”⁹

Other than targeting the West as the culprit, some official communications have also amplified the double-standards rhetoric, or the argument that the United States lacks legitimacy in criticizing Russia as well as China for not aligning with the West. In the past two months, there has been a flood of messaging by China’s official spokesperson aimed at discrediting the moral standing of the United States. At a March 4 press briefing, for instance, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin responded to U.S. accusations about China’s prior knowledge of Putin’s plans by calling them slander and by questioning whether the U.S. has made any real contributions toward world peace, accusing it of profiting from conflict.¹⁰ Other spokespersons have called out specific accusations about alleged war crimes. “Apart from Agent Orange, U.S. military planes brought ordnances and also landmines that are still posing threats to the daily lives of the Cambodian people,” tweeted Zhao Lijian, while sharing a video produced by Xinhua.¹¹ Overall, anti-Western, and especially anti-U.S., framing has been prominent in China’s official communications about the war, positioning the U.S. as the aggressor and as a morally bankrupt actor.

2. Channeling Russia’s positions

Other than indirectly supporting Russia by shifting responsibility to the West and to the United States—the narrative also widely communicated by Russian authorities in defense of its “military operations”—China’s official propaganda has consistently prioritized Russia’s position in the war. Taking the Xinhua News Agency (Chinese edition) as an illustration, its coverage of the war has predominantly favored Russian perspectives. In explaining Russia’s rationale for the war to domestic audiences, Xinhua News Agency has directly and uncritically publicized Putin’s rhetoric of “denazification” and “demilitarization,”¹² though it is important to note that the initial reference to the war as a “military operation” was later changed to the “Russia-Ukraine war.”¹³ In reporting on the ongoing battles, Xinhua has played down both Ukraine’s military gains and Ukraine’s suffering. A widely publicized story in the West about Ukraine’s sinking of the Russian navy ship, for instance, was reported by Xinhua as the warship caught on fire due to

⁹ “美国从这里向乌克兰输送武器 隔岸拱火三个算计” (The U.S. Delivers Weapons to Ukraine From Here, Stoking Fires from the Opposite Bank with Three Calculations), Xinhua, March 21, 2022 at, http://www.news.cn/world/2022-03/21/c_1128489508.htm

¹⁰ See the Weibo post, at <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4743320535829925?>

¹¹ See the Twitter post, at <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1523648687485775873>

¹² “普京: 解决乌克兰危机的条件是承认俄罗斯对克里米亚的主权, 以及乌克兰 ‘去军事化’ ‘去纳粹化’ 和保持中立地位” (Putin: The Condition to Solve the Ukraine Crisis Is to Recognize Russia’s Sovereignty over Crimea, and Ukraine’s ‘De-militarization’, ‘De-Nazification’ and Neutrality), Xinhua, February 28, 2022, at http://www.news.cn/2022-02/28/c_1128424639.htm

¹³ “俄乌战争打满两个月 西方为俄军总结教训” (Russia-Ukraine War Lasts for Two Months, the West Summarizes Lessons for Russian Army), Xinhua, April 28, 2022, at http://www.news.cn/mil/2022-04/28/c_1211641845.htm

undetermined causes. The article quotes Russia's popular news media, Sputnik.¹⁴ Russia's gains, in contrast, have been amplified. In an update on the progress of Russia's "military operations," a Xinhua report highlights the number of Ukrainian military facilities successfully targeted and destroyed by Russian forces in Ukraine.¹⁵ In reporting on Russia's military progress, moreover, the story of Russia's military aggression against civilian targets is largely absent. A report about a residential building being hit by a rocket, for instance, does not place responsibility on Russia, and the story about the Bucha massacre only receives indirect mention, calling for further investigation.¹⁶

In Xinhua news coverage as well as in other Chinese official media reports, Russia's position has been communicated through reliance on Russian official voices and footage. A large-scale analysis of the most shared posts from China's official media outlets finds that nearly half of such posts can be classified as pro-Russian, meaning that they include some information that is either taken directly from Russian state media or is attributed to a Russian official.¹⁷ In my analysis of reporting by Xinhua, voices of Russian military officials and spokespeople are disproportionately used. In analyzing *Xinwen lianbo*, CCTV's nightly news program, I also found that coverage of the war either relies on Russian media footage or on reporting by CCTV correspondents in Russia (Moscow). In the unusual case of Phoenix TV, the Chinese correspondent even embedded himself with Russian forces in Ukraine.¹⁸

In some cases, Chinese state media and Foreign Ministry spokespeople directly amplify Russia's disinformation about the war. In March, state media and official spokespeople spread Russia's official provocations about U.S.-funded biolabs in Ukraine. China's Central Television Station, CCTV, for instance, reported on Moscow's biolab theory as part of its news package, citing

¹⁴ “俄军莫斯科号巡洋舰起火 近期在乌克兰海岸执行任务” (The Russian Cruiser Moskva on Fire, It Was on a Mission by the Ukrainian Coast), Xinhua, April 14, 2022, at http://www.news.cn/mil/2022-04/14/c_1211636357.htm

¹⁵ “俄国防部: 俄军已瘫痪乌克兰军事基础设施 118 处” (Russian Defense Ministry: Russian Army Cripples 188 Military Infrastructure Facilities in Ukraine), Xinhua, February 26, 2022, at http://www.news.cn/mil/2022-02/26/c_1211587640.htm; “俄国防部: 俄军已累计摧毁乌克兰军事设施 821 处目标” (Russian Defense Ministry: Russian Army Destroys 821 Targets of Ukrainian Military Facilities), Xinhua, February 26, 2022, at http://www.news.cn/mil/2022-02/26/c_1211588901.htm;

¹⁶ “外交战加新制裁 ‘布恰事件’ 令俄西博弈再升级” (Diplomatic War and New Sanctions, “Bucha Incident” Makes Russia-West Rivalry Escalate), Xinhua, April 6, 2022, at http://www.news.cn/2022-04/06/c_1128536646.htm.

¹⁷ McCarthy and CNN's Beijing Bureau, “China's Promotion of Russian Disinformation Indicates Where Its Loyalties Lie.”

¹⁸ Helen Davidson, “‘I’m on the Frontline in Mariupol’: The Chinese Reporter Embedded with Russian Troops,” *The Guardian*, March 16, 2022, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/16/im-on-the-frontline-in-mariupol-the-chinese-reporter-embedded-with-russian-troops>

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov.¹⁹ China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, also shared inflammatory posts about the threats from U.S. biolabs in Ukraine. During his March 8 press briefing, for instance, he echoed Russia's claims about the biolabs and called on the U.S. to "disclose specific information as soon as possible, including information about which viruses are stored there and what research has been conducted."²⁰ His remarks and Twitter posts on this issue have been disseminated by Chinese state-media outlets. Russia's disinformation was also amplified in the context of international allegations about Russia's war crimes in Ukraine. Several official Chinese media outlets, for instance, directly echo Russia's line on the Bucha massacre as manufactured or faked by Ukrainians.²¹ The only story referring to the incident by Xinhua News Agency (Chinese version) quotes multiple Russian officials, including the Russian defense minister, the press secretary, the Russian ambassador to the UN, and the Russian foreign minister, that cast doubt on Ukraine-reported atrocities in Bucha.²² The CGTN report about the Bucha massacre starts out with concerns expressed by Western leaders, and then most of the report is devoted to Russia's pushback against them, uncritically quoting a number of Russian officials.²³ The two more balanced articles from CGTN and Xinhua News (English edition) similarly call for a "full investigation" into what they refer to respectively as the "Bucha killings" and the "Bucha incident," but not directly acknowledging the massacre or Russia's responsibility for it.²⁴

3. Minimizing Ukraine's perspective and alternative voices about the war

While amplifying Russian perspectives, Chinese official communications about the war have deliberately minimized Ukraine's position in this conflict. In the entire corpus of Xinhua's (Chinese edition) coverage of the war, only about a dozen stories emphasize Ukraine's

¹⁹ McCarthy and CNN's Beijing Bureau, "China's Promotion of Russian Disinformation Indicates Where Its Loyalties Lie."

²⁰ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on March 8, 2022," PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 8, 2022, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202203/t20220309_10649938.html

²¹ Paul Mozur, Steven Lee Myers, and John Liu, "China's Echoes of Russia's Alternate Reality Intensify Around the World," *New York Times*, April 11, 2022, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/11/technology/china-russia-propaganda.html>

²² "外交战加新制裁 '布恰事件' 令俄西博弈再升级" (Diplomatic War and New Sanctions, "Bucha Incident" Makes Russia-West Rivalry Escalate).

²³ "Examining the Bucha Evidence," CGTN, April 6, 2022, at <https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2022-04-06/Truth-or-fake-Examining-the-Bucha-evidence-18ZvxAkrQQM/index.html>

²⁴ "Foreign Ministry: China Calls for Full Investigation into Bucha Killings," CGTN, April 6, 2022, at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-04-06/China-calls-for-full-investigation-into-Bucha-killings-190IUcMHCKs/index.html>; "China Calls for Restraint Surrounding Bucha Incident," Xinhua, April 6, 2022, at <https://english.news.cn/20220406/c81b9e8857804ce79caae2509d259f83/c.html>

perspective by citing voices from Ukraine. A few of these stories highlight Ukraine's selective victories vis-à-vis Russia, but others frame Ukraine as isolated and helpless. When Ukraine's application to join NATO did not elicit a positive response, for instance, Xinhua quoted President Zelensky as lamenting about being abandoned by the West.²⁵ In my analysis of CCTV's *Xinwen lianbo* coverage, I find that the featured Ukrainian perspectives are largely those of high-ranking officials like Zelensky, and they are mostly in the context of peace negotiations with Russia, channeling a hopeful message about the Ukrainians' readiness to come to an agreement.

There are slight distinctions worth noting between domestically and externally oriented Chinese state-media coverage when it comes to channeling perspectives from Ukraine. In contrast to CCTV, CGTN has carried more reporting about Ukraine's casualties and suffering in the war. For example, on April 14, a CGTN reporter who visited the city of Chernihiv that had been besieged by Russian forces, recorded footage of war-ravaged buildings in this battleground city.²⁶ On the same day, another CGTN reporter met returning residents to a town surrounding Kyiv and interviewed them about their experiences during the war.²⁷ The differences in the CGTN coverage versus the CCTV coverage may be attributed to its distinct positioning as China's main international news outlet catering to global audiences and working to compete with outlets such as CNN and Al Jazeera. Scholars of CCTV International, the predecessor of CGTN, have argued that CGTN has long enjoyed a special position in the Chinese media system, allowing it more space for daring on-the-ground reporting.²⁸ English-language coverage of the war by Xinhua News Agency also features some differences from the Chinese-language coverage, with the former incorporating more stories about Ukraine's military victories, such as the retaking of the Chernobyl plant²⁹ as well as about civilian casualties due to Russian airstrikes.³⁰ Again, this is likely attributed to the external positioning of this content and the fact that Xinhua appears as a more legitimate news outlet internationally. At the same time, when it

²⁵ “乌克兰国防部通报最新战况: 已摧毁超 160 辆俄军坦克装甲车辆” (Ukrainian Defense Ministry Update: Destroyed Over 160 Russian Tanks and Armored Vehicles), Xinhua, February 25, 2022, at http://www.news.cn/mil/2022-02/25/c_1211587025.htm

²⁶ “CGTN Visits Once-besieged Chernihiv to North of Kyiv,” CGTN, April 14, 2022, at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-04-14/CGTN-visits-once-besieged-Chernihiv-to-north-of-Kyiv--19dPxeG1CQU/index.html>

²⁷ “Ukraine Conflicts: Meeting Up Returning Residents on Outskirts of Kyiv,” CGTN, April 14, 2022, at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-04-14/The-aftermath-in-the-outskirts-of-Kyiv-19dKFprCqRy/index.html>

²⁸ Liming Liang, “Going Live: News Innovations Amid Constraints in Chinese Coverage of the Iraq War,” *Journalism* (2011).

²⁹ “Ukraine's National Guard Retakes Control of Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant,” Xinhua Europe, April 6, 2022, at <https://english.news.cn/europe/20220406/ec8a911448ce44b3815e5992e5d301be/c.html>

³⁰ “12 Killed, 33 Injured in Russia's Airstrike on Ukraine's Regional Administration Building,” Xinhua Europe, March 30, 2022, at <https://english.news.cn/europe/20220330/c0ae8c8b92f4455a9d66da2d6dd6e961/c.html>

comes to more contentious stories about the war, such as the Bucha massacre, the more neutral positions of CGTN and Xinhua (English edition) still tilt toward Russia, as discussed above.

Explaining Pro-Russia Propaganda

China's pro-Russia propaganda during the Russia-Ukraine war has been interpreted by some Western media and analysts as an indication of China's pro-Russia policy. As noted in the introduction, however, China's foreign policy during this crisis has been relatively cautious, including abiding by the Western sanctions, halting some economic projects in Russia, and largely abstaining from either direct condemnation of or support for Russia's war. The pro-Russia leanings in official propaganda should be understood as part of larger trends in China's political communications and as a product of behavior that is opportunistic and self-preserving (and in some cases self-promoting) by official media outlets and spokespeople.

Current patterns in pro-Russia coverage build on long-term trends in official communications on foreign-policy matters, especially on Russia and the United States. Coverage of major international events has always been strictly regulated, with commercial media and online outlets given little space to publish alternative perspectives. Coverage concerning major countries such as Russia and the United States has been treated with special sensitivity by propaganda officials and media gatekeepers. In my research on political constraints on external propaganda, drawing on interviews with journalists at official media outlets, including Xinhua News Agency, I find that there is a general understanding among media professionals that Russia should be covered in a positive light.³¹ From my observations during the past decade, negative coverage of Russian politics, including protest movements against Putin's regime, has largely been avoided by Chinese news outlets.

The positive portrayal of both Russia and Putin's regime carries a symbolic significance in communicating China's friendship to Russia, but it also serves a defensive function of avoiding exposure of the Chinese people to political movements and dissent against authoritarian governments. In the context of the Ukraine war, the echoing by Chinese official media of Russian perspectives allows China to communicate sympathy toward Russia without bearing the practical costs of being pro-Russia in foreign policy. Softening the image of Russia as an aggressor also preempts domestic critiques of China's lack of direct involvement in this crisis as well as the larger questioning of Putin's political legitimacy and also that of authoritarian political systems in general.

The anti-U.S. and anti-Western component of China's official communications about the war, in turn, is consistent with the increasingly pervasive critiques of the United States (and the West) in China's domestic and external communications. Prior to the Trump era and in the early phases of his presidency, Chinese media professionals shared that, similar to their reporting on Russia, coverage of the United States was largely limited to a more constructive tone, or an emphasis on hopefulness and potential solutions to any frictions. As the China-U.S. relationship continued to

³¹ I conducted interviews with Xinhua News Agency's External Propaganda Bureau as well as with editors at *China Daily* and producers at CCTV English during the summers of 2018 and 2019.

deteriorate, however, the portrayal of the United States shifted toward more scrutiny. In the past years, Chinese domestic and global official media have frequently reported on the fractures in U.S. democracy, as evident in the detailed coverage of events such as the January 6 insurrection³² and the Black Lives Matter protest movements.³³ Most recently, news about the racially motivated Buffalo mass shooting has been widely circulating on Chinese social-media platforms. Critiques of U.S. foreign policy have also become more apparent and explicit, especially those expressed by more combative Foreign Ministry spokespeople such as Zhao Lijian or former *Global Times* editor Hu Xujin. The framing of the U.S.-led Western military coalition, NATO, as responsible for sparking the current war in Ukraine and the depiction of the United States as an untrustworthy international mediator feed into the larger patterns in Chinese media of targeting the moral standing of the U.S. as an exemplary democracy and as a global leader.

The extensive reliance on official Russian voices and footage by Chinese media in the context of this war, moreover, can be interpreted as an act of self-preservation and political opportunism. In the face of long-standing propaganda policies, along with specific directives allegedly prohibiting scrutiny of Russia-China relations or portrayals of the West in a positive light, Chinese official communicators have limited options. Using either Western or Ukrainian footage and perspectives risks antagonizing Russia and presenting the West as a unified force for morality and peace. Selectively relying on Russian perspectives and footage has allowed for covering of the conflict, while bypassing a dichotomous portrayal of Russia as the aggressor and the West as the savior.

Some official communicators, such as the Foreign Ministry spokespeople, have also likely taken advantage of this crisis to position themselves as relentless critics of the United States—something that plays well with domestic audiences. Zhao Lijian’s and Hua Chunying’s comments on Twitter, for instance, were widely circulated on Chinese social media. Following Zhao Lijian’s speculative post on Twitter about U.S.-funded biolabs in Ukraine,³⁴ for instance, the nationalist tabloid *Global Times* circulated a screenshot on Weibo³⁵ that received 4,800 likes and many nationalistic comments. The external social-media posts by Chinese diplomats are routinely transmitted by state media to an internal social-media platform, which feeds into the nationalistic online sentiments. I engage with this convergence and with the domestic implications of China’s pro-Russia communications in more detail in the following section.

Domestic Implications of Pro-Russia Propaganda: Reinforcing Nationalism

³² “国会山骚乱一周年 美国政治对立加剧” (One Year After the U.S. Capitol Insurrection, U.S. Political Divisions Deepen), Xinhua, January 6, 2022, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2022-01/06/c_1128238722.htm

³³ “记者手记：弗洛伊德遇害周年，美种族歧视痼疾未见起色”(Reporter’s Journal: One Year After the Murder of George Floyd, U.S. Deep-seated Racism Shows No Improvement), Xinhua, May 26, 2022, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2021-05/26/c_1127493294.htm

³⁴ See the Twitter post, at <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1504769988775006208>

³⁵ See the Weibo post, at https://weibo.com/1686546714/LkuZ7ivXQ?refer_flag=1001030103

Domestically, the pro-Russia leanings in official coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war appear to have resonated and merged with trends in public opinion. My analysis of widely circulated public commentaries about the war on Weibo reveals a strongly nationalistic bent and a pervasive depiction of the war as a conflict between Russia and the West (and especially the United States) rather than a conflict between Russia and Ukraine.³⁶ As in the official coverage, the West and the United States are often portrayed as the instigators. A popular commentary on Weibo, for instance, which generated about 4,600 shares, calls for the United States to abandon its hegemonic power and justifies wars as necessary for peace.³⁷ Another Weibo user posted a self-made video reviewing the bombing records of the U.S. army, which received more than 3,600 shares and over 9,000 likes.³⁸

Although other than social-media trends, we have limited access to Chinese public opinion trends about the Ukraine war, one survey conducted between March 28 and April 5 by the Carter Center China Focus finds that the majority of respondents (75 percent) agree that China's support for Russia in Ukraine is in China's national interest.³⁹ Interestingly, more consumption of state media, social media, as well as higher levels of education correlate with higher support for Russia in this survey. Other than revealing an apparent pro-Russia leaning in public opinion, this survey also finds a high percentage of respondents (70 percent) believing in conspiracy theories about U.S. biolabs in Ukraine—a finding that similarly correlates with the higher education and exposure to official and social-media channels. Though this survey represents only a fraction of the Chinese population (4,886 respondents), it reveals a convergence across official propaganda, social-media commentaries, and public opinion—all reinforcing one another in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine.

In thinking about how Chinese propaganda on Ukraine plays into the domestic legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, therefore, there are several potential implications. First, the leaning of the pro-Russia official media has thus far played into domestic nationalistic sentiments, as evident in the similarities between official and non-official anti-Western messaging on Weibo as well as in apparent public trust in anti-U.S. conspiracy theories. Second, the Russia-leaning coverage may work in favor of the party by inhibiting more public challenging of China's position on Ukraine. If more Ukrainian footage is shown and allowed to circulate on social media, public opinion may shift in favor of Ukraine and toward a questioning of China's ambivalent position in this crisis. At the same time, pro-Russia propaganda in this conflict may also serve to limit official flexibility in its foreign-policy maneuvering. Shifting toward aligning with the West or against Russia could be interpreted as weak or unpatriotic by the Chinese

³⁶ Maria Repnikova and Wendy Zhou, "What China's Social Media Is Saying About Ukraine," *The Atlantic*, March 11, 2022, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/03/china-xi-ukraine-war-america/627028/>

³⁷ See the Weibo post, at <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4740475237962201?>

³⁸ See the Weibo post, at <https://weibo.com/1708575033/LpL8ewSwW>

³⁹ "Chinese Public Opinion on the War in Ukraine," *US-China Perception Monitor*, April 19, 2022, at <https://uscnpm.org/2022/04/19/chinese-public-opinion-war-in-ukraine/>.

public, leaving China in a perpetual state of diplomatic ambiguity and awkward neutrality regardless of how far Russia goes in its efforts to reclaim Ukraine.

External Implications: China’s Uneven Global Favorability

Externally, China’s Russia-leaning propaganda has served to further alienate the Western countries. In parts of the Global South, however, China’s narratives have converged with local messaging, especially when it comes to questioning the West as the symbol of morality in the international system.

In a Western context, China’s pro-Russia messaging has impeded its attempts to stake out a neutral position in this crisis and has aggravated existing concerns about the growing China-Russia nexus as a threat to liberal democracies. The common associations of China’s propaganda with official foreign policy mean that its pro-Russia messaging is often interpreted as official policy. “China’s promotion of Russian disinformation indicates where its loyalties are,” reads the title of CNN’s long-form analysis of China’s coverage of the war in Ukraine.⁴⁰ A joint statement, issued following the recent EU-U.S. dialogue on China, criticizes China for spreading Russian disinformation about its war in Ukraine.⁴¹ It does not help that China’s pro-Russia propaganda has garnered more media and policy attention than have its more neutral foreign-policy measures, such as its attention to abiding by the Western sanctions against Russia.

More broadly, China’s messaging has amplified fears of a China-Russia alliance. A Pew public opinion poll published on April 28 about how Americans see China, for instance, reveals that the top public concern of Americans is the China-Russia partnership. About 62 percent of the surveyed adults see the relationship as a “serious problem.”⁴² This compares to about 47 percent who regard China’s involvement in U.S. politics as problematic.

In much of the Global South, however, China’s messaging about the war has not elicited major concerns. In contrast, some of China’s official narratives, especially the emphasis on the West being responsible, have been publicized by high-level officials. In South Africa, for instance, President Ramaphosa has publicly blamed NATO for the war in Ukraine.⁴³ Brazil’s presidential

⁴⁰ Simone McCarthy and CNN’s Beijing Bureau, “China’s Promotion of Russian Disinformation Indicates Where Its Loyalties Lie.

⁴¹ Finbarr Bermingham, “EU, US Slam China over Russia Ties, Alleged Falsehoods on Ukraine Invasion,” CNN, April 23, 2022, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3175254/eu-us-slam-china-over-russia-ties-alleged-falsehoods-ukraine>.

⁴² Christine Huang, Laura Silver, and Laura Clancy, “China’s Partnership With Russia Seen as Serious Problem for the U.S.,” *Pew Research Center*, April 28, 2022, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/04/28/chinas-partnership-with-russia-seen-as-serious-problem-for-the-us/>.

⁴³ Tim Cocks, “South Africa’s Ramaphosa Blames NATO for Russia’s War in Ukraine,” Reuters, March 18, 2022, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/safricas-ramaphosa-blames-nato-russias-war-ukraine-2022-03-17/>.

front-runner, Lula de Silva, in a recent interview similarly blamed the U.S. and the EU, as well as Putin and Zelensky, for inciting the war.⁴⁴ China's decision not to condemn Russia for the war also resonates with many other developing countries that similarly have taken a more neutral stance, as evidenced by their abstentions in the recent UN resolutions against Russia.

Overall, it appears that China's pro-Russia propaganda during the Ukraine war has cost it some soft power in the West, but it has potentially resulted in soft power gains in the Global South. It remains to be seen whether and how these relative shifts in China's favorability will shape its foreign policy in the future. Much depends on how the war progresses and the international consequences faced by Putin's regime as a result of its aggression in Ukraine.

Conclusion

China's official stance of neutrality on the war in Ukraine conflicts with its propaganda messaging. Its state-media outlets and Foreign Ministry spokespeople have tilted toward Russia by emphasizing the responsibility of the West in instigating the conflict as well as by prioritizing Russia's position and voices in its coverage, while minimizing or downplaying voices from Ukraine. The externally oriented state-media outlets have featured slightly more balanced reporting, but they still stress the responsibility of the West and largely skirt the most contentious stories, such as Russia's war crimes. These pro-Russia leanings are rooted in larger trends in official communications about China's relations with Russia and the United States. As the war progresses, the messaging might soften slightly, especially in English-language outlets, but it is unlikely to fundamentally shift considering the sensitivity of this issue and the multifaceted political pressures placed on official commentators. Thus far, this approach has resonated domestically and has converged with some elites and publics in the Global South. In the West, however, China's pro-Russia propaganda has been interpreted as a threat and a sign of escalation in the battle between democracies and autocracies.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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⁴⁴ "Brazil's Ex-president Lula Claims Zelenskiy Equally to Blame for War," *The Guardian*, May 4, 2022, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/04/brazil-lula-zelenskiy-blame-war>.

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