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WAR OF ROLES: NATIONAL ROLE CONCEPTIONS, ALTERCASTING, AND U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY IN THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

This article explores the behaviors of the U.S. and China regarding the war in Ukraine from a role theory perspective. The developments on the ground reveal that the American and Chinese positions on the Russia-Ukraine war should be viewed not independently from each other but within the context of their global strategic competition as well as the roles they attribute to themselves, known as national role conceptions, and the roles they attribute to one another, known as altercasting. From that point of view, the study argues that the war in Ukraine is not only a war of geopolitical significance between the West and Russia, but it is also a war of roles between the U.S. and China.

Keywords

U.S., China, role theory, national role conceptions, altercasting, Russia-Ukraine war

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Introduction

The war initiated by Russia in Ukraine in February 2022 has ushered in a new era of great power competition. This war has not only revealed the divergent security expectations between the West and Russia, but it has also sparked a new front in the U.S.-China rivalry. Zelensky, the Ukrainian leader, has stated that he would participate in peace talks only if the U.S. and Chinese leaderships attend.¹ In the meantime, the fact that China has signaled interest in mediating between Russia and Ukraine has increased expectations about China's growing diplomatic presence after arranging talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023. While the U.S. has not objected to the Chinese proposition to mediate between the fighting parts in Ukraine, U.S. State Secretary Blinken recently made clear that the U.S. has a cautious stance toward China's "pro-Russian neutrality."² Evidently, the Ukrainian war has revealed the divergent security expectations between the West and Russia. At the same time, however, the very same war holds in its background, the clash of national role conceptions between the U.S. and China, which compete on a global scale.

This article aims to understand the behaviors of the U.S. and China regarding the war in Ukraine from a role theory perspective. The developments on the ground reveal that the American and Chinese positions on the Russia-Ukraine war should be viewed not independently from each other but within the context of their global strategic competition, and the roles they attribute to themselves (national role conceptions) and to each other (altercasting). As mentioned by the U.S. National Security Strategy of 2022, the U.S. views China as the only competitor with "both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective."³ From that perspective, this article argues that the war in Ukraine is both a war of geopolitical significance between the West and Russia and a war of roles between the U.S. and China. Put differently, the study stresses that the return of geopolitics with the Russia-Ukraine war has triggered a great power role contestation between the U.S. and China.

First, the study will provide a brief overview of role theory, focusing in particular on the notions of national role conception and altercasting. The second section sheds light on how the U.S. conceives its national role and how throughout history it has attempted to cast China into a particular role. This section also reveals how the Chinese resistance against the U.S. altercasting efforts has strengthened since the early 2010s and how China has begun to cast

back the U.S. The third and final section discusses the contesting national role conceptions and altercasting efforts by the U.S. and China since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

Theorizing the U.S.–China Rivalry: A Framework for Role Theory

Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), as a subfield of the discipline of international relations, was born under the Cold War dynamics due to “dissatisfaction with the simplistic nature of realist accounts of foreign policy”⁴ to shed light on foreign policy decisions taken by countries of the rival camps. Particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. administrations prioritized research in this field to understand and explain how foreign policy in the Soviet system was formed and by whom. While there have been manifold seminal studies stressing different factors in the foreign policy decision-making process since then, K. J. Holsti’s article titled “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy” stands out in the literature on role theory, breathing new life into the existing literature on FPA. In his work from 1970, Holsti argued that categorizing the world in terms of blocs and neutrals was simplistic, and that there were special factors contributing to the foreign policy preferences of states, such as roles.⁵ Although the concept of role was frequently used in diverse fields of social sciences by sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists in previous decades, Holsti’s work brought role theory to FPA.⁶ Walker also contributed to the revitalization of role theory in FPA with his edited book *The Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis*, in 1987.⁷

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According to Holsti, the policymakers’ conceptions about their country’s role and the expectations of other actors are the main drivers behind foreign policy decisions. In this framework, role conceptions are essential and are based on the perceptions of foreign policymakers. How foreign policymakers conceive of their countries’ role within the international system, and more specifically, how

they position their countries vis-à-vis other countries, is critical. One could argue that roles serve as roadmaps helping policymakers in making decisions.⁸ In his groundbreaking study, Holsti scrutinized hundreds of statements made

by highest-level policymakers from 71 governments between January 1965 and December 1967 and revealed 17 distinct national role conceptions. Yet, according to role theory, roles are not only constituted by the actors, but they are relational entities. In other words, roles define a “self” vis-à-vis another in a given group.⁹ Harnish stresses that states’ roles are social positions which are constituted by ego and alter expectations.¹⁰

Holsti attributed three dimensions to role theory. The first dimension includes national role conception, namely an actor’s self-perception and self-attributed position. The second dimension is based on role expectations, or, in Holsti’s terms, role prescriptions; in other words, the expectations of others and the expectations emanating from the dynamics of the international system on the actor. The third dimension is role performance or the foreign policy behavior of a state, namely, all decisions and actions taken by the state when performing a role.¹¹ One could argue that while the first dimension represents the ego dimension, the second one represents the alter dimension.¹² From Holsti’s perspective, role theory underlines the interaction between the ego and alter dimensions, and he stresses these two as independent variables affecting the role performance of an actor.¹³ However, he also adds that “self-defined national role conceptions seemingly take precedence over externally derived role prescriptions.”¹⁴

Altercasting comes up as a critical concept, which takes the alter dimension one step further. Weinstein and Deutschberger defined altercasting as “projecting an identity, to be assumed by other(s) with whom one is in interaction, which is congruent with one’s own goals.”¹⁵ This definition, which dates back to 1963, portrayed altercasting as a basic technique of interpersonal control since the purpose of altercasting is to “cast Alter into a particular identity or role type.”¹⁶ Cast contributed to the same argument by stressing that even if ego may attempt to altercast alter, alter may resist by generating its own role conception.¹⁷ Although altercasting was first launched in the field of social psychology, the concept was subsequently incorporated into role theory and FPA particularly with the studies conducted by Thies. According to Thies, altercasting is mainly based on manipulating since “in order to altercast, Ego needs to manipulate cues during interaction in order to influence Alter’s definition of the situation.”¹⁸ Thies also contributed to the abovementioned argument by Cast, indicating that power plays a critical role in whose definition of the situation prevails.¹⁹ In other words, “more powerful actors should be able to generate their own role identities, behave in ways consistent with these role identities, altercast role

identities on others, and resist attempts at being altercast in turn.”²⁰ In short, accepting or rejecting attempts of altercasting depends on power and in that respect, relations between the U.S. and China emerge as an excellent test case for altercasting.

U.S. National Role Conceptions and Attempts to Altercast China from Past to Present

One might argue that since the foundation of the Union, the U.S. national role conceptions have been revolving around a special belief, namely American exceptionalism. This belief derives from the ideas that the U.S. has an exceptional history, geography, natural richness, and population, and stresses that the U.S. is an exceptional nation.²¹ Being an exceptional nation has attributed a strong sense of mission to the U.S. in its foreign relations, leading

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the U.S. to conceive itself throughout history as a leader, a defender of the faith, a global police force, a benign hegemon, a responsible great power, a liberator, and a democratizer. While the sense of being unique has led American policymakers to portray the U.S. as a responsible great power in its foreign relations with other countries, the same policymakers have simultaneously stressed the pragmatic pursuit of American interests. Therefore, the

U.S. national role conceptions have included other more realistic roles such as “pragmatically internationalist power in global order” and “ego-centric maximizer of national interests.”²² This is how moral responsibility in the self-conceived roles of the U.S. has been balanced with more realist inclinations. While different U.S. executives have developed different foreign policy strategies depending on the changing global context throughout the decades, the U.S. national role conceptions toward different regions and countries have presented more continuities than changes.²³

The Open Door Policy, a set of guiding principles sent as diplomatic notes by U.S. Secretary of State John Hay to Great Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Russia, and Japan in 1899, had a major influence on how the U.S. initially approached China. In his notes, Hay declared that in order to maintain China’s

territorial and administrative integrity, the U.S. would pursue complete equality of privileges among all great nations trading with China. The U.S. policy's primary goal was to prevent any other state from assuming a dominant position in China. Thies argues that with the 1899 Open Door Policy the U.S. constructed a role identity for itself in Northeast Asia which was mainly based on the roles of "balancer," i.e., the one who balances the great powers' interests and privileges in China; "great power," the one authorizing Chinese political independence from other great powers; and "regional protector," the one who protects regional states from the interference of other powers.²⁴ Thies maintains that particularly the last role was an attempt by the U.S. to project a special role to China, which was congruent with the U.S. regional goals and interests. Thus, while the U.S. attributed the "regional protector" role to itself, it attributed the role of "protectee" to China.²⁵

It is important to note that in the early 20th century, China had neither the capacity nor the will to resist and contain the role projected on itself by the U.S. The U.S. attempts to cast China into a protectee and a subordinate actor succeeded, and continued for a long time. Although Mao depicted China as a revolutionary state in 1949 and constructed a new national role conception for the country,²⁶ the altercasting by the U.S. largely undermined China's role conceptions in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the role projected on China changed in the early 1970s when the U.S. recognized the People's Republic of China and this time, began to altercast a "great power" role on China in order to create a rift between China and the Soviet Union in the détente era.²⁷ This time, the projected role by the U.S. on China was consistent with China's self-conceived role. By the end of the 1970s, the Chinese government initiated a number of reforms to incorporate the principles of a free market economy into a socialist state, which resulted in a considerable level of economic growth. This is how China rekindled expectations for a return to its historical international power status.²⁸

The U.S. attempts to altercast China continued steadily in the subsequent decades. With the outbreak of the Second Cold War in the 1980s, once the U.S. re-asserted itself more clearly as the defender of liberal democracy and free market capitalism, it altercasted the "troubled modernizer" role on China and transmitted the message that China was a pupil who had to learn from the teacher, namely the U.S. After the incidents of Tiananmen Square in 1989 though, a key incident that changed the U.S. perception of China,²⁹ the projected

role on China changed from “troubled modernizer” to “failed modernizer,”³⁰ a new role symbolizing that China had failed to embrace liberal values such as democracy and human rights. Even if China resisted the U.S. by generating its own role conception in those decades, the U.S. attempts to altercast China prevailed over China’s own national role conceptions since, as Thies argues, “power plays a critical role in whose definition of the situation prevails.”³¹

Unsurprisingly, in the first decade of the 2000s, when China achieved significant levels of economic growth following more than two decades of modernization reforms, the resistance coming from China to counter attempts at being altercast by the U.S. began to strengthen and become more visible. In effect, while China was “role taking” in the 1990s, in other words, taking the role attributed by others, namely the U.S., in the early 2000s, it started to engage in “role bargaining,” or bargaining the role attributed by others.³² By repeatedly highlighting the historical legacy of China’s imperial position, Chinese leaders resisted and bargained previously attributed roles to China. Carnsten-Gottwald and Duggan stress that Chinese foreign policy at that time was marked by “an adaptation of its historical role conception as a ‘leading developing country’ to that of a ‘responsible care taker.’”³³

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In return, China’s efforts to bargain the projected roles on itself created room for mounting concerns in the U.S., whose policymakers began to question whether China could be a responsible stakeholder within the U.S.-led liberal international order. Shortgen argues that these concerns led the U.S. to support China’s entry into the World Trade Organization, a support symbolizing

the “altercasting strategy aimed at ensuring Chinese restraint.”³⁴

A key illustration of the role bargaining process initiated by China came with the concept of “China’s Peaceful Rise,” introduced by Bijian, a veteran Chinese politician, in 2005. Accordingly, Chinese rapid development since the late 1970s had paved the way for China to achieve great power status in the first decade of the 2000s. However, for Bijian, the Chinese rise to this status would not pose a threat to international peace and security since China would help to maintain a peaceful international environment.³⁵ Thus, China’s peaceful rise

was completely in line with the principles it was looking for in foreign relations: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.³⁶ While Chinese policymakers referred to China's rise and development as "peaceful," there have been opposing views in the U.S., both in academic and political circles. According to Mearsheimer, for example, China could not rise peacefully, so the U.S. and China were likely to engage in an intense security competition with "considerable potential for war."³⁷ For Nye, though, the two great powers would not necessarily go to war and instead would learn how to coexist.³⁸

The 2010s began with growing debates on China's rise both in international society and within the U.S. According to Shortgen, it was in the second decade of the 21st century that China left aside its "role bargaining" and adopted "role making." In other words, since the early 2010s, China is not only resisting and bargaining the projected roles for itself, but it is also challenging them by constructing its own role and, more importantly, altercasting back the U.S. as a hegemonic power "attempting to victimize China and prevent China from attaining its rightful role in the international system."³⁹ Needless to say, China's impressive economic capabilities, in other words, the change in the relative distribution of power in Sino-American relations, is the main driver behind this fundamental change.

China's self-perception as a "responsible great power" has been consolidated, particularly since 2012, with the ascension of Xi Jinping to the position of Chinese leader. Xi's vision for China, characterized by rising confidence, assertiveness, and leadership, bears many similarities with that of Mao on the grounds that it underlines the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.⁴⁰ This vision, also known as the "Chinese Dream," requires a re-evaluation of China's 21st century roles within the international system.⁴¹ The speech made by General Secretary Xi in 2012 has been evaluated as China's definitive abandonment of its low-profile role conceptualizations from previous decades.⁴² Today, China's national role conceptions present a variety from guardian of the developing world and a leading member of the most powerful nations to peace-broker, anti-imperialist, and a responsible great power looking for a more just and equitable international order.⁴³

More interestingly, today, China does not only have the power to construct its own role within the international system and to impose its self-conceived role as a fact, but it also has the capacity to altercast back. For many in China, the term “Chinese rise” should be replaced by “Chinese re-emergence” onto the world stage since Chinese history is largely marked by a great power legacy. From this perspective, the goal of Chinese foreign policy is not to bring a fundamental novelty to the international system, but to return China to its former glory.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, according to the Chinese, the U.S. stands as an impediment that seeks to block the awakening of free nations. As Mao stated in 1960, “What imperialism fears most is the awakening of the Asian, African and Latin American peoples, the awakening of the peoples of all countries. We should unite and drive US imperialism from Asia, Africa, and Latin America back to where it came from.”⁴⁵ Not coincidentally, the current Chinese leadership frequently stresses that China is looking for a more just and equitable international order.⁴⁶ China does not hold back in this regard when condemning the U.S. for leading a liberal order that has resulted in countless injustices for the rest of the world. For example, in the wake of the visit of Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in 2022, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson criticized the U.S. for acting as a “hypocrite provocateur,” claiming itself to be a “moral judge” in world affairs.⁴⁷ One should notice that China is casting back the U.S. into an imperialist, unfair hegemonic power meddling in the internal and regional affairs of others.

Naturally, efforts of altercasting back by China are not at all welcome in the U.S. Today, the U.S. does not only perceive China as an economic, strategic, and sociocultural rival,⁴⁸ but it is also vigilantly looking for an overarching strategy toward China. Although the U.S. policymakers have refrained from pronouncing the concept of “containment” so far,⁴⁹ in order not to revitalize the specter of the Cold War and not to alienate China, key security documents reveal that the main goal of the U.S. toward China should be to counter and roll back Chinese intentions to make sure that it is “America, not China, who sets the international agenda.”⁵⁰ By underlining China’s revisionist claims, particularly in island disputes with Japan over areas of the South China Sea, the U.S. casts China into the roles of violator of liberal international order/norms and as an irresponsible great power while these projected roles are completely rejected by the Chinese leadership with an altercasting back effort. Recently, the war in Ukraine constitutes a perfect example of the clash of national role conceptions and altercasting efforts between the U.S. and China.

The War in Ukraine: A War of Roles between the U.S. and China?

Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, both the U.S. and China have frequently called for the end of all hostilities in Ukraine. Yet, they have differed from each other in identifying the aggressor and in the way they suggested hostilities should cease. The U.S. policymakers have made it clear that Ukraine is the victim and that Russia, as the aggressor, should withdraw its troops from Ukraine immediately and respect the state sovereignty of Ukraine as the first step to end this “unprovoked and unjustified war.”⁵¹ From the U.S. point

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of view, Russian leader Putin, with his “authoritarian rule, neo-imperialism and nationalism,” has not only challenged the state sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine because of Ukraine’s pro-Western trajectory, but has also undermined all liberal values and norms that have marked the world since the end of World War II.⁵² In that sense, it is not surprising that the U.S. has coordinated efforts to impose severe sanctions on Russia, and has spearheaded the Western nations to unite against Russia and send economic and military aid to Ukraine.⁵³ The U.S. policymakers have emphasized that while they would not intervene against Russia on behalf of Ukrainians, they would assist them in fending off Russian aggression.⁵⁴ One may contend that the U.S. stance on the war in Ukraine not only fully complies with the self-conceived roles the U.S. has been embracing since its founding, such as leader, responsible great power, liberator, and democratizer, but also aids the U.S. in justifying its roles. In other words, by opposing Russian aggression in Ukraine, the U.S. performs and strengthens its national role conceptions.

In return, China has frequently stressed that respecting the sovereignty of all countries – without mentioning Ukraine – and ceasing hostilities should be top priorities for all sides. Yet, it has also stated that “the legitimate security concerns of any country” – without mentioning Russia – have to be respected,⁵⁵ and that abandoning the Cold War mentality – without mentioning the U.S. – is a must for

a peace in Ukraine.⁵⁶ China has not pronounced the word “war” and has preferred the word “crisis” to define the battlefield in Ukraine; it has also refrained from describing Russia as “aggressor/invader” and Ukraine as “victim.”⁵⁷ While China has stated that it is in a “neutral” position and has stated numerous times that it is not a party to the “crisis” as part of its traditional policy to stay out of others’ conflicts, it has also emphasized that it is not just Russia that has the blame since the “Cold War mentality” imposed by the U.S. is what started this “crisis.”⁵⁸ In addition to this, China has declared that it is against the unilateral sanctions against Russia, since from the Chinese point of view, the sanctions coordinated by the U.S. serve only to exacerbate global economic problems including the rising prices of food, crude oil, and natural gas, as stated by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁵⁹ Thus, since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Chinese position is in line with China’s self-conceived roles, such as anti-imperialist and responsible great power looking for a more just and equitable international order, since from the Chinese perspective, the “crisis” in Ukraine is not a matter of Russian expansionism but is directly linked to the U.S. Cold War mentality and to U.S. hegemonic ambitions, which have, in turn, irritated Russia.

One could argue that both the U.S. and China have been insistently altercasting each other since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war. Many Americans think China is considering providing arms and ammunition to Russia, which China vehemently rejects, while China’s professed “neutrality” with regard to the conflict in Ukraine could only be characterized as a pro-Russian neutrality. The fact that China’s economic ties with Russia fundamentally improved following the harsh sanctions imposed by Western nations on Russia in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine has not only generated significant criticism by the U.S.,⁶⁰ but it has also contributed to the U.S. efforts to cast China as a violator of international order/norms and an irresponsible great power taking sides with the aggressor.

Just before the invasion of Ukraine, on 4 February 2022, General Secretary Xi and President Putin met before the opening ceremony of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and made a common statement on their “no limits friendship.” The reports about this meeting do not necessarily imply that two leaders discussed the invasion of Ukraine directly; however, their statement was retrospectively perceived by Western media as “the most detailed and assertive statement of Russian and Chinese resolve to work together to build a new international order based on their view of human rights and democracy.”⁶¹ In addition, the

Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs made a statement on China's position on the "political settlement of the Ukrainian crisis" on 24 February 2023 where the Chinese proposed a twelve-point peace plan to end hostilities in Ukraine. Among the twelve points, while there are some common principles with those advocated by the U.S., such as respecting the sovereignty of all countries, ceasing hostilities, resuming peace talks, resolving the humanitarian crisis, protecting civilians, and keeping the nuclear power plants safe, there are some other points that contradict the U.S. position such as "abandoning the Cold War mentality" and "stopping unilateral sanctions against Russia."⁶² The absence of any point urging Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine in China's peace plan contributed to the U.S. efforts to altercast China.⁶³

While China tries to project an image of being a neutral, responsible great power seeking peace in Ukraine, the U.S. argues that China has frequently rehashed Russian justification for the invasion. It should come as no surprise that statements made by prominent members of the U.S. administration have transmitted the message to the world public opinion that China acts or may act as an irresponsible great power undermining the existing international order. After the announcement of China's twelve-point peace plan, for example, U.S. President Biden stated that China's position on the Ukrainian war was not "rational" and that the plan was not "beneficial to anyone other than Russia."⁶⁴ With his remarks, Biden cast doubt on China's claims of impartiality and painted it as a partial power putting forth an unfair scheme. He also contributed to the discussions on China's ambivalent diplomatic posture, asking how a major power could offer a purported peace plan that only benefits the aggressor while claiming to be neutral, anti-imperialist, and seeking a just and equitable international order. U.S. Secretary of State Blinken similarly emphasized his hesitance toward China's peace initiative by characterizing China's position as morally indefensible: "There is a victim and there's an aggressor, there is no moral equivalence between the two positions. Until recently, it was very unclear whether China accepted that basic principle."⁶⁵ In another recent statement, Blinken stressed that he had asked China's government "to be vigilant about private companies that may be providing Russia with technology that could be used against Ukraine."⁶⁶ Blinken made it clear that although China may not be

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acting directly in violation of international order, by choosing to turn a blind eye to Chinese firms' military support for Russian aggression in Ukraine, it was in indirect violation of international order. Thus, Blinken did not only portray the U.S. as a responsible great power and liberator asking China to be vigilant about this issue, but he also successfully cast China into the roles of violator of international order (albeit indirectly) and irresponsible great power.

While the U.S. altercast role of violator of international order and irresponsible great power still captures the U.S. view of China in the Russia-Ukraine war, the Chinese counter-cast role of imperialist, unjust hegemonic power captures China's view of the U.S. As official statements demonstrate, China resists attempts at being altercast by projecting its self-conceived role and by casting back the U.S. In response to U.S. efforts to portray China as an ambivalent power, Chinese key figures conspicuously underline that the Chinese diplomatic position regarding Ukraine is not ambivalent, unjust, or partial. In contrast, the Chinese position is completely consistent with China's self-attributed roles, such as an anti-imperialist, responsible great power, since for the Chinese, the security of one country (Ukraine) shall not be preserved at the expense of the security of others (Russia). Therefore, the West should recognize the indivisibility of security, as a basic component of the Global Security Initiative, a security framework launched by General Secretary Xi at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference in April 2022.⁶⁷ From this vantage point, a new conception of security that takes into account the legitimate rights and interests of both Western and non-Western states should replace the one that is dominated by the West.⁶⁸

Similarly, China sees and reflects the U.S. as a hegemon that enforces Cold War thinking and forbids non-Western states from taking a more decisive role. Accordingly, the U.S. is insistently attempting to victimize non-Western powers, such as China and Russia, and prevent them from acquiring their rightful status in the world. For Wang Yi, for instance, the foreign minister of China, the "Cold War mentality" of operating in "exclusive small circles" jeopardizes international security.⁶⁹ Accordingly, both the U.S. mentality and the international order it leads need a fundamental shift in perspective. It is not a coincidence that China's Foreign Ministry, around the same time with its twelve-point peace plan regarding Ukraine, in February 2023, released another official document titled "U.S. hegemony and Its Perils." In the document, the Chinese stated that since the end of World War II, the U.S. "has acted more boldly to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, pursue, maintain and

abuse hegemony, advance subversion and infiltration, and willfully wage wars, bringing harm to the international community.”⁷⁰ While the Chinese ministry elaborated in detail on the justifications of U.S. political, military, economic, technological, and cultural hegemony, it also expressed the reasons why China should react against the “unilateral, egoistic and regressive hegemonic practices” of the U.S.

China’s disapproval of the U.S.-led international order helps to explain China’s lukewarm attitude regarding sanctions against Russia. The sanctions problem is a key focus of China’s attempts to cast back the U.S. The argument that China is not a party to the conflict in Ukraine is commonly used to support China’s determination to maintain normal trade relations with Russia. According to the Chinese, the U.S. employs sanctions against Russia as a means of gaining more power and preserving its unjust global system. Chinese Defense Minister at the time, Wei Fenghe stated that sanctions are not effective ways to solve problems. In contrast, sanctions may even exacerbate tensions.⁷¹ Similarly, the U.S. Department of Commerce’s decision in June 2022 to sanction five Chinese companies for their support for Russia’s military according to Zhao Lijian, China’s foreign ministry spokesperson, is “another example of U.S. unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction.”⁷² Lijian depicted China as an anti-imperialist force seeking to protect the legitimate rights and interests of its corporations against the U.S., which acts as a hegemon reshaping the globe unilaterally.

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China’s efforts to resist the U.S. altercasting by generating its own national role conception and its efforts to cast back the U.S. have crystallized more clearly with China’s recent interest in mediating between Russia and Ukraine. When Chinese leader Xi contacted Zelensky, his Ukrainian counterpart, for the first time in April 2023 and later declared he would designate an envoy to work on a future peace for Ukraine, China presented itself as a prospective mediator and peace-broker.⁷³ Evidently, there are reasons behind the Chinese decision to construct a “peace-broker” role for itself.

It is not surprising to see that the continuation of the war in Ukraine appears to bear costs to China in three fields. The first field includes strategic costs as

rather than eroding the U.S.-led alliance system, the conflict in Ukraine has strengthened ties between the democracies of the U.S., Europe, and Asia. This global unity of liberal democracies is nothing more than a handicap for the Chinese leadership, which has long spoken of a post-Western order.⁷⁴ The second field includes economic costs. Evidently, the European perception of China is harmed by China's "no-limit friendship" with Russia. Since February 2022, Chinese commerce with Russia has been flourishing, while China's economic ties with the EU are in jeopardy. Given that the EU is China's largest export market, in the event of a protracted conflict, China will be forced to choose between its economic links to the West and those with Russia, and to determine which is more lucrative than the other. As a result, China's current propensity to satisfy Russian trade demands cannot be a viable tactic for China's long-term economic objectives.⁷⁵ It is also true that the conflict in Ukraine presents a problem for China's Belt and Road Initiative, a program to use land and sea networks to link Asia with Africa and Europe in order to improve regional integration, boost commerce, and promote economic growth. With the war it experiences, Ukraine, which is at the geographical center of this project aiming to revive the historical legacy of the Silk Road, makes it difficult for China to carry out its long-term objectives.⁷⁶

The third field includes the costs that China has incurred in its national role conceptions since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. While China has emphasized

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repeatedly it takes no sides in the Russia-Ukraine "crisis", its relations with Russia call into question China's claim to be neutral and contribute to U.S. efforts to altercast China as an irresponsible great power in violation of international order. In short, China is well aware that although today, it is powerful enough to resist attempts at being altercast by the U.S., in the long term, a prolonged war serves to justify the roles attributed to it by the U.S. Under these circumstances, the best way for China to consolidate its self-

perceived position and justify its self-attributed roles as an anti-imperialist and responsible great power is to mediate meticulously between Russia and Ukraine

to end the war. Also, a probable mediation helps China to cast back the U.S. by transmitting the message to the world public that it is China, not the U.S., which has a bigger leverage in global diplomacy as a responsible great power.⁷⁷ In that regard, mediation is a must for China not only in dealing with the strategic and economic costs emanating from the war, but also in order to contain the costs regarding China's roles. Rather than being an option, mediation appears to be incumbent for China to justify its national role conceptions, resist attempts at being altercast by the U.S., and to cast back the U.S. in this war of roles.

What's more intriguing is that the U.S. has not protested China's desire to mediate in Ukraine. This is not because the U.S. fully supports the Chinese diplomacy, but because any U.S. opposition to the Chinese mediation would be a blow to the U.S. self-attributed role as a responsible great power. To put it another way, despite its worries about China, the U.S. does not want to come across as being "anti-peace."⁷⁸ However, by speculating on how a pro-Russian power could mediate a reasonable settlement in Ukraine, the U.S. administration has made clear its reservations over a potential Chinese mediation. Yet, even by raising this query, the U.S. projects an ambivalent great power role on China.

Conclusion

As of the time of writing, China's mediation proposal has not resulted in any tangible progress. However, it appears that only China has the power to pressure Russia to halt the invasion.⁷⁹ China's exports to Russia increased by 67.2% in the first half of 2023,⁸⁰ despite the U.S. continuing to spearhead sanctions against the latter. Whether China will be keen to mediate between Russia and Ukraine remains to be seen. This article, however, underlines that mediation between Russia and Ukraine appears to be a necessary strategy for China rather than an option.

The main argument presented in this article is that both the U.S. and Chinese positions regarding the war in Ukraine should be viewed through the lens of their global strategic competition. The U.S. and Chinese national role conceptions, either self-conceived or self-attributed roles, and their mutual altercasting efforts are critical for shedding light on their behaviors in the Russia-Ukraine war. Contributing a new perspective to the literature, this article has used conceptualizations such as national role conceptions and altercasting borrowed from role theory to scrutinize both great powers' approaches to the war in Ukraine. The study argues that the war in Ukraine is a war of roles between the

U.S. and China, and that the future of Ukraine remains a secondary issue for both.

The article also supports the arguments put forth by Thies and Shortgen, who have contributed to role theory with their studies on altercasting and “role taking, bargaining, and making.” China, which was subject to the U.S. altercasting efforts since the end of the 19th century, is now strong enough to resist attempts at being altercast. While China has abandoned “role taking” and “role bargaining” processes, it has been “role making,” particularly since the early 2010s, due to the fundamental change in the distribution of world power. Today, China is not only constructing and projecting its self-attributed roles to the world, but it is also casting back the U.S. The war in Ukraine demonstrates that both the U.S. and China, with the positions they adopt, are empowering their national role conceptions while altercasting each other. Whose altercasting will prevail over the other remains to be seen over time.

Given the ever-increasing rivalry between Washington and Beijing, this article is a moderate attempt to understand both great powers’ positions in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Assessing a process that is already in motion is extremely difficult. We anticipate that this study will serve as a guide for further investigation into the U.S. and Chinese perspectives on the war in Ukraine.

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