

Home before Dark: China's Approach to The Russian War in Ukraine

A Review Essay by Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova

China's Foreign Policy Contradictions: Lessons from China's R2P, Hong Kong, and WTO Policy

Tim Nicholas Rühlig. Oxford University Press, 2021.

Home before Dark

TV series by Dana Fox and Dara Resnik. Apple TV+, 2020.

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Introduction

Questions surrounding the foreign policy strategy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) are plentiful, especially when a real-world problem of Chinese foreign policy response beyond slogans and

keywords of PRC elites arises—most recently, China’s position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Consequently, critics expect the China watcher community to uncover a masterplan, an overarching strategy, that China is careful not to fully reveal but that nevertheless could be pieced together through histories, speeches, policies, initiatives, and visuals, if only one were sufficiently knowledgeable and meticulous to find and contextualise the clues.

Tim Rühlig’s latest book challenges the very existence of an explicable, translatable, and, therefore, predictable Chinese foreign policy. ‘The lack of academic consensus on how to describe China’s approach to the rules and institutions underlying the international order’, he writes, ‘is the result not primarily of theoretical differences, but of *contradictory* Chinese foreign policy. This book summarizes and explains these contradictions and sets out their implications for the future international order.’¹ Such built-in contradictions are in fact a major roadblock to a popular international attempt to buy into a ‘Beijing consensus’. With such an inconsistent track record from Beijing, other countries just don’t know what they are getting themselves into. The book features an unpacking of the Chinese Party-State, the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ in Hong Kong, approaches to welfare, and WTO policy, among other topics.

This review essay, however, will focus on one particular contradiction scrutinised in Rühlig’s work: that of China’s approach to security and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) policy. I shall then apply these conclusions to China’s approach to Russia’s war in Ukraine. It suggests that China’s position on Russia’s R2P argument or indeed to the whole of Russia’s war in Ukraine is neither neutral nor ‘middle ground’. Actually, it is a series of contradictory statements and actions that are allowed to coexist and overlap in PRC messaging, adding up to support that falls just short of casting itself squarely in the Russian worldview.

1 Tim Rühlig, *China’s Foreign Policy Contradictions: Lessons from China’s R2P, Hong Kong, and WTO Policy* (Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 2.

In other words, for China, it is not about avoiding venturing into the Russian camp. Rather, it is about making it home safely before nightfall. China has no problem lending a hand to the Russian position. Where China draws the line is at setting up camp and moving into it.

Home before Dark: A Policy Metaphor

‘Look, I just didn’t want you to get hurt, okay?’ says the father to his young daughter, the protagonist of the Apple TV+ series *Home before Dark*, as she sets out to uncover secrets in a small town the family just moved to.² The father is fully aware that he cannot keep her from venturing into risky situations; he knows her too well. But he is hoping to decrease the risk, believing that as long as she’s free to explore during daylight and his little girl is home and in bed before nightfall, they can go back to the starting line, the status quo. Forget the close calls, the jump scares, the bruised knees, and, most importantly, the conflicts of the day before, because there is always a chance of starting over and wiping the slate clean the following morning. Making it home before dark means averting the consequences. Indeed, the parent’s rule for the child to make it ‘home before dark’ does not constrain any action the child might or might not take by daylight. The metaphor serves only as a reminder that when night falls the consequences tend to catch up with you.

The image of nightfall, the ‘dark’, is something we have been introduced to from our childhoods. It is almost a point of no return, a moment after which going back to the initial position becomes increasingly hard—a divide between safety and danger, and the threshold beyond which a game setting beckons real life hazards. What’s more, the parent’s plea is universal—just like the day and night divide—a global parenting standard.

2 *Home before Dark*, created by Dana Fox and Dara Resnik (Apple TV+, 2020).

No wonder, then, that the perception of there being a line between consequences and no consequences, and getting away with just about anything without being particularly careful as long as one makes it back in time to square one, stays with people as they become adults. Retreat to safety before dark is so deeply ingrained at the individual level that it would not be too much of a stretch to apply this metaphor to political behaviour, including foreign policy.

The Russian StratCom Version of the UN's Responsibility to Protect

Today as Russia wages war in Ukraine, perhaps a suitable case for exploring a 'home before dark' mindset, there is a particular Chinese foreign policy contradiction in the security realm: the Responsibility to Protect. 'China's changing but contradictory approach to security issues in general and military intervention in particular', Rühlig writes, 'is even more apparent in regard to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), an emerging norm that fundamentally redefines security in terms of human rather than collective security.'³

Just a year after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the international community watched mass murder unfold again, this time in Europe, in the former Yugoslavia, seemingly unable to prevent it. Time and again, preventive actions would fail, as states fell back on the principle of sovereignty and annihilated a number of their own subjects. 'Through error, misjudgement and an inability to recognize the scope of the evil confronting us, we failed to do our part to help save the people of Srebrenica from the [Bosnian] Serb campaign of mass murder,'⁴ read the 1999 United Nations Report of the Secretary General pursuant to General Assembly resolution 53/35.

3 Rühlig, *China's Foreign Policy Contradictions*, p. 3.

4 United Nations Peacekeeping, *Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 53/35: The Fall of Srebrenica (A/54/549)*, 15 November 1999.

Helplessness in the face of human suffering created a momentum in the UN for a new international norm, accelerating an already nascent debate over drafting a norm that would create an opening to override the sacred principle of state sovereignty should a state fail to protect all populations within its own borders. The initiative succeeded and a new paradigm of international law, the Responsibility to Protect, came into being. The 'Responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity' section of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, paragraph 139 (wording China agreed to), states: 'The international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means, in accordance with Chapters VI and VIII of the Charter, to help to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.'⁵ The United Nations defines R2P as 'a political commitment to end the worst forms of violence and persecution. It seeks to narrow the gap between Member States' pre-existing obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law and the reality faced by populations'.⁶

Six years after R2P was introduced during the UN World Summit, grounds for applying the doctrine in real life arose. In February and March 2011 a wave of 'Arab Spring' popular uprisings spread throughout Libya and Syria. The incumbent rulers, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and Bashar al-Assad in Syria, cracked down on protesters. As the violence escalated, civil wars ensued in both countries, and the governments resorted to war crimes and crimes against humanity in their efforts to regain control.⁷ Armed conflicts in Libya and Syria led to broad calls for military intervention from outside, providing R2P with 'its most crucial test on the practical level'.⁸ Both conflicts are widely recognised as compelling R2P situations because they 'appealed to the doctrine's full

5 United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 16 September 2005*, p. 30.

6 United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, 'Responsibility to Protect: About'.

7 Yasmine Nahlawi, *The Responsibility to Protect in Libya and Syria: Mass Atrocities, Human Protection, and International Law* (Routledge, 2020), section 6.1, section 7.1.

8 Peter Hilpold, 'From Humanitarian Intervention to the Responsibility to Protect', in *The Responsibility to Protect (R2P): A New Paradigm of International Law?*, Peter Hilpold (ed.), (Brill, 2015), p. 2.

scope so that robust measures, including the use of force, were required to counter seemingly deliberate and gross failures of the respective governments to protect their populations'.⁹

China's fundamentally different policies towards Libya and Syria represent a case of China's contradictory policy. In the Syrian case, the PRC rejected intervention on the grounds of defending state sovereignty. In Libya, China did nothing to prevent foreign intervention by the NATO-led coalition and against the will of the Libyan government.¹⁰ Syria and Libya show a contradiction between two comparable cases. China's narrative approach to Russia's war in Ukraine presents that same paradox, but within a single case.

R2P in the UN understanding, or by any other measure, has no bearing on Russia's invasion and war in Ukraine. Still, interestingly, it was this exact argument that Russia used in its communication and to which China, to some extent, lent a shoulder in its public space. Therefore, one might argue that this contradiction in PRC foreign policy—the approach to R2P and its application—is exemplary of a broader 'home before dark' approach to Russia's war in Ukraine. First, it is important to establish the Russian line of argument in relation to R2P. Then, the echoes of the Russian argument need to be established and tracked in Chinese foreign policy communications.

Russia's version of R2P was added to the Russian Constitution in 2020 with its 'protection of compatriots' interpretation: 'The Russian Federation provides support to compatriots living abroad in exercising their rights, ensuring the protection of their interests and preserving the all-Russian cultural identity.'¹¹

Announcing the attack on Ukraine at dawn on 24 February 2022, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, used a national

9 Nahlawi, *Responsibility to Protect in Libya and Syria*, introduction, p. 2.

10 Rühlig, *China's Foreign Policy Contradictions*, p. 41.

11 Russian Federation, State Duma, 'Novyy tekst Konstitutsii RF s popravkami 2020', 3 July 2020, Article 69.

adaptation of the R2P argument: ‘It is necessary to immediately stop this nightmare—the genocide against the millions of people living there, who rely only on Russia, only on us.’¹² Even though the claim has been refuted, including in the most recent OSCE report on civilian deaths in the conflict-affected regions of Eastern Ukraine—which concluded that the main cause of civilian deaths was ‘cases where civilians have found ammunition, grenades or UXO [unexploded ordnance] and have detonated them while mishandling or dismantling them, including to extract parts to sell for scrap metal while trying to earn a living’¹³—the narrative alone is enough.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov used the same argument at length on 1 March in his video address to the UN Human Rights Council’s 49th session, blaming the UN and using the need to protect as justification for Russia’s actions:

In the face of gross violation of the rights of Russian and Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine, an eight-year war against them that bears every sign of genocide, the stubborn refusal of the West to get the Ukrainian authorities to fall in line and the absence of any response from UN human rights bodies, the OSCE or the Council of Europe, Russia could not remain indifferent to the fate of Donbass and its 4 million people.

He continued,

President Vladimir Putin resolved to recognise the Donetsk and Lugansk people’s republics and, at the urging of the leaders of the DPR and LPR, to launch a special military operation to protect

12 RIA novosti, ‘[Tekst obrashcheniya prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina](#)’, 24 February 2022.

13 OSCE, ‘[Thematic Report of the Impact of Mines, Unexploded Ordnance and other Explosive Objects on Civilians in the Conflict-Affected Regions of Eastern Ukraine, November 2019 – March 2021](#)’, May 2021.

their residents in accordance with the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with these republics. The goal of our actions is to save lives by fulfilling our allied obligations, as well as to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine so that this never happens again.¹⁴

A month later, the communication of the Russian invasion as an act of protection was still foremost, tying the UN into the argument, as yet another speech of Sergei Lavrov suggests:

[We] were forced to launch a special military operation in Ukraine aimed at protecting people from the military threat to which they had been exposed for eight long years, as well as at the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine. [...] Over the past two years, at the expense of the Foundation [for the Support and Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad], experts from the human rights structures of compatriots have prepared a series of fundamental analytical reviews exposing massive violations of the rights of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine. These include manifestations of neo-Nazism and xenophobia encouraged by the Ukrainian authorities, facts of targeted persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church. All reports are submitted to Russian law enforcement agencies, the Investigative Committee, specialized

14 Botschaft der Russischen Föderation in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks at the High-Level Segment of the UN Human Rights Council's 49th session, via Videoconference, March 1, 2022', 2 March 2022.

multilateral structures, including within the UN system.¹⁵

Both statements amount to accusing the UN of not applying the R2P logic as a justification for Russia having to take matters into its own hands as a consequence.

Many have flagged that Putin's and Lavrov's R2P logic has taken root in the Chinese information space. Jordyn Haime offers a more detailed analysis of this phenomenon in the article 'China Adopts Russia's "Denazification" Myth to Rationalize Invasion of Ukraine'.¹⁶ The Russian R2P rationale is repeated in Chinese state media when reporting the war in Ukraine, or *Wukelan jushi*—'the Ukraine situation', as it's known in Chinese discourse—including via the Russian propaganda story that 'Ukrainian "neo-nazis" opened fire on Chinese students, injuring two'.¹⁷

This could lead to the conclusion that China is fully backing the Russian approach to the *Wukelan jushi*, including how it applies Russia's national variation to the R2P argument. However, the story of 'Ukrainian neo-Nazism' and, consequently, its implied R2P argument is absent from official PRC statements. Igor Denisov writes: 'Despite the increased proximity between the Chinese and Russian positions [...] China has made no pronouncements on Russia's desire to "denazify and demilitarize" Ukraine. [...] The Chinese silence can hardly be seen as a tacit agreement with Russian talking points—rather the opposite. This is where the division between the positions of Moscow and Beijing runs.'¹⁸

15 Botschaft der Russischen Föderation in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 'Vystupleniye Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.V. Lavrova na zasedanii Komissii General'nogo soveta partii "Edinaya Rossiya" po mezhdunarodnomu sotrudnichestvu i podderzhke sootchestvennikov za rubezhom, Moskva, 28 marta 2022 goda', 29 March 2022.

16 Jordyn Haime, 'China Adopts Russia's 'Denazification' Myth to Rationalize Invasion of Ukraine', *Times of Israel*, 6 March 2022.

17 CGTN Europe (@CGTNEurope), '#BREAKING Russian President Vladimir Putin says Ukrainian 'neo-nazis' opened fire on Chinese students, injuring two', Twitter, 3 March 2022.

18 Igor Denisov, '"No Limits"? Understanding China's Engagement with Russia on Ukraine', *The Diplomat*, 24 March 2022.

China's understanding of R2P leaves room for manoeuvre for national governments. A semi-official Chinese version of R2P known as 'Responsible Protection' was introduced in 2012: the 'Chinese initiative is intended to, first, provide criteria or guidelines for UNSC decision-making on the appropriateness of military intervention, and second, ensure that any such authorized action is monitored and supervised adequately so as to reduce the risk of R2P being used as a smokescreen for other strategic objectives such as regime change'.¹⁹

Pan Yaling from the Center for American Studies, Fudan University, Shanghai, writes that China 'firmly and consistently supports the international moral consensus embodied in the "responsibility to protect" principle'. However, 'compared with the moralism and extremism practiced by the West in promoting the "responsibility to protect" principle, China's contribution has far-reaching international political significance, that is, it has achieved a balance between the internal diffusion and external diffusion of international norms'. China's approach, she writes, is 'not only conducive to the construction of more just and reasonable international norms and international order, but also conducive to the development of the theory and practice of major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'.²⁰ Huo Yiwen from Hebei University of Economics and Business also underscores a specific Chinese approach to R2P, namely 'the development of the theory of "responsibility to protect" based on Chinese characteristics, aiming at the dilemma of "responsibility to protect" in practice, [...] a feasible plan with Chinese wisdom'.²¹ According to such readings, China, while not opposed to R2P on moral grounds in principle, adopts an approach which does not mirror the UN formula. This would give China room to back the Russian R2P argument even when it lies outside the scope of the UN's R2P. China, however, chooses not to.

19 Andrew Garwood-Gowers, 'China's "Responsible Protection" Concept: Reinterpreting the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and Military Intervention for Humanitarian Purposes', *Asian Journal of International Law* 6, No 1 (2014): 89–118, p. 3.

20 潘亚玲, 中国与“保护的责任”原则的发展, 《国际观察》2016年 第6期.

21 霍艺雯. 论“保护的责任”理论的发展与完善[D] [On the Development and Perfection of 'Responsibility to Protect' Theory]. 河北经贸大学, 2022.

This Chinese approach, rooted in a strategic dilemma, depending on the degree of proximity assumed to exist between Russia and China, can be called consistent ambiguity, a balancing act,²² or an implicit backing of Russia via non-action. All of these readings can be brought back to the deeper foreign policy contradiction Tim Rühlig describes.

Ambiguity or Contradiction? ... Yes

China's communication, albeit favouring the Russian story, does not go as far as to back Russia's war and echo pro-Kremlin rhetoric. Information on Russian R2P logic is available to Chinese society. The *Global Times* Chinese edition quotes Vladimir Putin in a publication reposted on other media channels, including ifeng.com and 163.com: 'Unfortunately, in our neighbouring country—Ukraine, we have long seen the rampant neo-Nazism [...] All this is accompanied by an unprecedented and rampant anti-Russian wave in the so-called politically correct Western civilized countries.'²³ And yet, China's foreign policy actors voice messages in official and state media channels where they appear to value the sovereignty of Ukraine. Foreign Minister Wang Yi remarked in a phone call with his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba: 'China's fundamental position on the Ukraine issue is open, transparent and consistent. We have always advocated respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries.'²⁴ This is Beijing's approach that Chairman Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang called 'promoting talks for peace in its own way'.²⁵ Anything that could be read as promoting a US agenda or siding with the West at large is not on the table for Beijing because it negates the opportunity brought by Russia's war in Ukraine: to use the conflict as proof that the US is bad

22 Meia Nouwens, 'China's Difficult Balancing Act in Russia–Ukraine Crisis', *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 4 March 2022.

23 张江平, 王力, 普京:在乌克兰早就能看到新纳粹主义猖獗,一些西方“伙伴”却对此视而不见, *Huanqiu wang*, 17 May 2022.

24 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Wang Yi Speaks with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on the Phone', 2 March 2022.

25 State Council, People's Republic of China, 'Premier Calls on China, EU to Enhance Dialogue, Coordination, Deepen Cooperation', 1 April 2022.

for global security. Neither is going all-in supporting Russia because China is not interested in being dragged into Russia's stand-off with the West. The option that remains is the refuge of ambiguous statements, paradoxical signals, and contradictory remarks.

Let us examine the first factor—China's interest in demonstrating that the West, specifically the US, has a detrimental effect on global security. In China's interpretation, Russia's actions are a consequence of being pushed 'to the wall' when 'the US drove five waves of NATO expansion eastward all the way to Russia's doorstep':²⁶ the accession of Poland, Hungary, and Czechia in 1999; the accession of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia in 2004; the accession of Albania and Croatia in 2009; the accession of Montenegro in 2017; and last the accession of North Macedonia in 2020. China prefers to attack the US and NATO as the 'culprit and the leading instigator of the Ukraine crisis'.²⁷ This reading understandably serves China's agenda in its vicinity, notably the South and East China Seas.

But the idea that the sheer proximity of the US's security architecture to Russia's borders warrants war is a non-sequitur even by China's measure. Consequently, one more link is needed to justify Russia's signalled grievances and its attack on a sovereign neighbouring state. Russia's R2P claim that the Ukrainian side has been conducting 'genocide' serves this purpose. But overamplifying it could lead China down the slippery slope of admitting that something 'human-rightsy' trumps state sovereignty. China's solution: China's state media are comfortable with repeating the Russian story about 'neo-Nazis' in Ukraine and the need to protect threatened Russian-speakers: 'The frenzy of Ukrainian neo-Nazis has reached a level that causes indignation. Recently, a video of "Ukrainian militants using the mobile phone of a fallen Russian soldier to humiliate his mother" sparked outrage on overseas social media.'²⁸ In

26 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, '[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on February 23, 2022](#)', 23 February 2022.

27 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, '[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on April 1, 2022](#)', 1 April 2022.

28 [乌克兰新纳粹镜面带笑容:俄罗斯人,你儿子死了](#), Sina, Source: Huanqiu Wang, 27 March 2022.

the meantime, they come full circle to finding a way to blame the US for the emergence of neo-Nazis in Ukraine,²⁹ serving the ‘it’s all because of the US’ narrative. Hence, ‘Some scholars bluntly stated that the United States is the main culprit behind the current chaos in Ukraine, and it intends to instrumentalize the neo-Nazi forces ...’ From the perspective of totalitarian form, racism, and methods of war, the United States is a country that provides soil for the breeding of neo-Nazism.”³⁰ A *Global Times* article republished on Sina.com quotes Zhang Yifei of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Officially, China is silent on this aspect of Russian strategic communications. The R2P argument is out there; no need to put it into the mouths of state foreign policy officials.

The second factor determining China’s approach is the goal of avoiding being dragged into a US–Russia stand-off and becoming bound to the losing side. There has been no swift Russian victory despite the official Russian account of the ‘first phase of the special operation being mostly complete’.³¹ Siding with a weak-looking side associated with war atrocities and having few friends does not make a lot of sense for China. The Bucha horror in Ukraine had invoked comparisons with the Nanjing Massacre in Chinese social media. Witness: ‘As Chinese people who have the memories of the Nanjing massacre, those who can still defend massacre of civilians have utterly lost their conscience.’³² This fear is especially apparent, if one is inclined to believe that Vladimir Putin during his Olympic visit to Beijing failed to inform Xi Jinping fully while presenting China’s president in an unfavourable light. Chinese officials, however, continue to repeat with great confidence that China ‘is on the right side of history’, but unlike the US its actions show restraint.

29 Huang Lanlan and Cui Fandi, ‘[GT Investigates: Evidence Suggests US May Have Supported Neo-Nazi Azov Battalion](#)’, *Global Times*, 7 March 2022.

30 新纳粹主义为何在这些国家蔓延?, Sina, Source: Huanqiu wang, 18 May 2022.

31 Interestingly, China’s CGTN reporting on the issue has attempted to balance the Russian and the Ukrainian narratives, quoting both senior Russian military official Sergey Rudskoy and the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy: ‘[Russia Says Main Tasks of First Stage of “Special Military Operation” Achieved](#)’, CGTN, *YouTube*, 26 March 2022.

32 Weibo user quoted in ‘[China’s U.N. Envoy Calls Violence in Ukraine’s Bucha “Deeply Disturbing”](#)’, *Japan Times*, 6 April 2022.

The contradiction between the two goals described above is so dramatic that it is impossible to hide it beneath ambiguous wording. Even the Ukrainian Association of Sinologists—people who know China intimately and have written on its ambiguous nature—are calling for clarity: ‘For many years, the People’s Republic of China has opposed global hegemony, condemned all forms of aggression, and advocated for world peace. Today, when Ukraine is a victim of Russian hegemony and military aggression, voices are heard in China justifying it. Ukraine has the right to request that China express a clear attitude toward Russia’s actions.’³³

What comes out of China’s contradiction, then, is a ‘home before dark’ approach to positioning itself in this conflict. China is not neutral, nor has it adopted a middle ground. It is venturing out of the middle ground into the Russian camp, showing rhetorical support for Russia. Meanwhile it maintains the reading that Russia’s ‘special operation’ is not about encroaching on Ukraine or undermining its sovereignty. Rather, it is about standing up to US hegemony, while allowing the story of Russia’s R2P argument to circulate within China’s tightly controlled information space. But China also ensures that it comes home before nightfall every time, taking measures not to be tied permanently to Russia, strategically signalling that ‘this is not our war’,³⁴ and worshipping at the altar of ‘sovereignty and territorial integrity’³⁵ in its conversations with Ukrainian counterparts. In spite of calling Russia central to China’s proclaimed ‘community for a shared destiny in the new era’,³⁶ Russia’s destiny remains one China is reluctant to share.

And Western pressure is having an effect too. The position US President Joe Biden is taking when highlighting ‘the implications and consequences if China provides material support to Russia as it conducts brutal attacks

33 Ukrainian Association of Sinologists, ‘[Appeal of the Ukrainian Association of Sinologists](#)’, 13 April 2022.

34 European Commission, ‘[Statement by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with President Michel following the EU-China Summit via videoconference](#)’, 1 April 2022.

35 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Wang Yi Speaks’.

36 中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦关于新时代国际关系和全球可持续发展的联合声明, 中华人民共和国中央人民政府, Source: Xinhua, 4 February 2022.

against Ukrainian cities and civilians'³⁷ is one of being either with us or against us. China is aware of the newly unified West, so much so that Xi Jinping can only urge the EU 'to form its own perception of China [and] adopt an independent China policy'.³⁸

Still, as its summit with China on 1 April has shown, the EU is moving in a similar direction to that of the US. President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen opened her statement at her press conference with: 'Indeed, today's Summit was certainly not business as usual. It took place in a very sober atmosphere. It took place against the backdrop of the Russian war still unravelling in Ukraine.'³⁹ A few months later, the organisers of a major trade expo in Shanghai did not play a pre-recorded video address of the President of the European Council that 'was set to criticise Russia's "illegal war" in Ukraine and call for reduced EU trade dependency on China': China is coming to terms with the realisation that the EU does not believe its statements of neutrality.⁴⁰

When Night Falls: The Future of China's Foreign Policy Contradictions in Ukraine

When the worried father tells his inquisitive daughter not to stay out after nightfall, he is aware that it is a near impossible request. What's more, it is the whole point of the TV show. As the girl detective becomes more invested in her investigation, it becomes harder and harder for her to make it home to safety each night. Screenwriters and their viewers know and expect that the child is bound to miss the curfew sooner or later. The moment will come when there will be no more waking up to a morning of no consequences.

37 The White House, 'Readout of President Joseph R. Biden Jr. Call with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China', 18 March 2022.

38 'Xi Jinping: China, EU Should Bring More Stability to a Turbulent World', CGTN, 1 April 2022.

39 European Commission, 'Statement by President von der Leyen'.

40 Martin Quin Pollard and Jan Strupczewski, 'Exclusive: China Cancelled EU Leader's Video Address at Opening of Major Trade Expo', 8 November 2022.

How long can China hide in the safety of its ambiguous ‘home before dark’ approach to Russia’s war in Ukraine? As the days grow longer and the war drags on, there is a risk that China could be venturing further into the Russian worldview. However, Beijing openly siding with Moscow, militarily or economically by helping Russia circumvent Western sanctions, seems implausible at this point. Tim Rühlig suggests that countries tend to be less than excited by China’s rise precisely because of its foreign policy inconsistencies. China already has a trust and image problem.⁴¹ And outspoken support towards Russia will not help China’s case or attempts to save face.

It is hard to predict how long China’s ‘home before dark’ ambiguity will last, and on which side China will ultimately set up camp if caught out by nightfall. While the search for an overarching, consistent, and predictable framework of understanding continues, perhaps there is something to be said for the use of this metaphor in lifting the veil on PRC foreign policy behaviour in Ukraine.

41 Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, ‘[How Global Public Opinion of China Has Shifted in the Xi Era](#)’, Pew Research Center, 28 September 2022.