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CHINA'S "PRINCIPLED NEUTRALITY" AT THE UNITED NATIONS DURING THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Key words: China, United Nations, principled neutrality, diplomacy, Russo-Ukrainian war.

This paper examines China's performance of "principled neutrality" in the United Nations during the Russo-Ukrainian war (covered period: 2014–2025). In Chinese diplomatic language, neutrality is expressed through formulas such as an "objective and impartial position" (客观公正立场), "fair and impartial" (公正), "not taking sides" (不选边站), "promoting peace and dialogue" (劝和促谈), and the "independent foreign policy of peace" (独立自主的和平外交政策). Using a "words and deeds" framework, the study traces how China's declared neutrality in speech contrasts with—or is selectively reinforced by—its observable behavior across UN organs. While China frames this stance as a principled commitment to the UN Charter and to peaceful dispute settlement, systematic analysis shows that neutrality functions less as a doctrine and more as a strategic performance shaped by China's political stakes, institutional preferences, and relational alignments.

A qualitative reading of Chinese speeches in the UN Security Council and General Assembly reveals that the linguistic repertoire used by Chinese representatives remains remarkably consistent across time, venues, and personalities. Actor nomination avoids naming Russia directly and instead relies on generic collectivities such as "all parties," "the relevant sides," and

“the international community,” which diffuse agency and remove explicit responsibility. Predication consistently assigns China positive attributes such as “constructive,” “consistent,” or “responsible,” while negative dynamics are framed as abstract structural tendencies like the “Cold War mentality” or the “expansion of military blocs.” Inclusion and exclusion choices reinforce a preferred narrative: sovereignty and territorial integrity are emphasized; sanctions and pressure are criticized; dialogue and negotiations are presented as the only viable path; and references to accountability, aggression, or occupation are systematically omitted. Argumentation draws on reciprocal causal logics: pressure “complicates” the situation, while dialogue “creates conditions” for peace.

A notable dimension is the difference between the Chinese originals and the UN’s English records. High-modality imperatives in Chinese (必须, 不得, 严禁) are routinely translated into softer English formulations such as “should” or “should not,” reducing the prescriptive force. Emotional framing and cumulative critiques grounded in indivisible security also become muted. The Chinese originals therefore remain the primary source for interpreting deontic force and diplomatic pressure in China’s position.

China’s voting record across the UN system further illustrates the practical expression of this discursive posture. Using verified UN roll-call data from 2014 to 2025, the analysis identifies four Security Council resolutions and twenty three General Assembly resolutions on Ukraine, supplemented by votes in the Human Rights Council, World Health Assembly, FAO Council, UNESCO Executive Board, and the IAEA Board of Governors. The voting pattern is consistent: China abstains on attributional or punitive texts in the General Assembly, votes against resolutions imposing explicit penalties (such as Russia’s suspension from the Human Rights Council or reparations), and supports Security Council texts only when they are non-attributive, technical, or humanitarian in orientation. China’s affirmative vote on the U.S.-drafted, non-attributive ceasefire resolution S/RES/2774 (2025) reflects a pragmatic adjustment, aligning with global calls for de-escalation while avoiding condemnation of Russia.

Across the broader UN system, China’s pattern of sovereignty-driven selectivity persists. In the Human Rights Council, UNESCO, WHO, and the IAEA, China opposes or abstains on texts that “politicize technical mandates” or assign blame to Russia, while supporting initiatives emphasizing supply-chain stability, humanitarian access, or technical cooperation. The FAO case demonstrates that China’s neutrality repertoire is performative but adaptable: when no actor is blamed, China acts cooperatively; once blame enters the frame, voting shifts—even as the linguistic repertoire stays the same.

A brief comparison with China’s discourse on Palestine/Gaza during 2023–2025 highlights the selectivity of its neutrality. In Gaza debates, China

directly names Israel, the “occupying Power,” and the United States; employs morally charged language (“collective punishment,” “full siege”); cites Xi Jinping’s authority on the two-state solution; and foregrounds International Humanitarian Law. It also votes “For” all major ceasefire and humanitarian texts. This contrasts sharply with the Ukraine corpus, where China avoids attribution, casualty references, or legal labels. The comparison shows that China’s neutrality is deployed most strictly where its geopolitical stakes are high, as in Ukraine, and is relaxed where alignment with the global South is beneficial and Russia’s role is marginal, as in Gaza.

The discourse and voting record reveal a coherent pattern. China presents neutrality as principled, Charter-based, and universally applicable, committed to conflict resolution through compromise in the Security Council, but practices it as a form of sovereignty-bound selectivity. Abstention serves as a calibrated tool to avoid precedent-setting accountability measures, preserve ties with Russia, and maintain a posture of procedural legitimacy. Support is given to non-attributive texts that uphold consensus and technical cooperation. This dynamic reinforces proceduralism within the UN system, privileging sovereignty and consensus over enforcement. As a result, humanitarian and technical agencies such as the FAO, IAEA, WHO, and UNESCO become the only viable arenas for limited action on Ukraine, while political bodies like the Security Council and Human Rights Council remain constrained by abstentions and procedural maneuvering.

From a critical standpoint, China’s behavior illustrates a tension between rhetorical support for the UN Charter and reluctance to apply Charter-based constraints when they clash with strategic relationships. This tension reflects a broader crisis of authority in the international order: a United Nations that retains procedural legitimacy but struggles to enforce norms against major-power interests. Ultimately, China’s “principled neutrality” operates as a sovereignty-first strategy that preserves diplomatic flexibility, aligns rhetoric with selective engagement, and reinforces a UN system caught between legal commitments and political paralysis.

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