

China's Balancing Act: UN Discourse on Ukraine Through a Securitization Lens

Aktoty Aitzhanova, Steffi (Stefanie) Weil, Christian Kaunert

Published: 29 March 2025

When Russia launched its large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it justified the action by claiming that Ukraine's political direction and alleged NATO encroachment posed a direct threat to Russia's national security (Blank, 2022; di Pennisi & Chen, 2023; Eggen, 2022). [President Vladimir Putin](#) framed Ukraine as harbouring Nazi elements and being manipulated by Western powers, thus warranting a special military operation. This rhetoric was supported by Russia's political and military leadership, emphasizing the safety of Russian-speaking populations in Donbas and portraying NATO's eastward expansion as an existential threat to Russia (Eggen, 2022; Putin, 2022).

Internationally, most [European governments](#) and the United States rejected Russia's threat narrative, imposing sanctions and condemning the invasion (di Pennisi & Chen, 2023; EU, 2023; Lukman & Farique, 2024; Sartoretti, 2022; Song, 2024). [The United Nations \(UN\) General Assembly initiated Special Emergency Sessions](#) dedicated to Ukraine, with China abstaining on most resolutions (Farzanegan & F. Gholipour, 2023; UN, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e, 2022f, 2022g). [China's response in the UN](#) has been marked by cautious balancing, reflected in its voting pattern and official statements. China consistently abstained or avoided explicit condemnation of Russia, maintaining a stance of tacit neutrality (Andersson et al., 2023; Blank, 2022; Greitens, 2022; Haug, 2024; Krivokhizh & Soboleva, 2023; Lam & Fung, 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023a, 2023b; Stefanović & Popović, 2022).

[Securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School](#), examines how issues are transformed into matters of security through discourse. Diverse issues can be securitized through speech acts, justifying actions that might otherwise be impermissible in peacetime (Buzan & Wæver, 2009; Buzan & Wæver, 1997; Buzan et al., 1998). Later scholars have refined this approach, arguing that securitization is not only a linguistic act but also [a pragmatic, context-dependent process](#) shaped by the reactions of the audience. In more authoritarian contexts, the audience for securitization may be restricted or coerced, complicating the original model (Balzacq & Barnier-Khawam, 2020; Balzacq & Guzzini, 2015; Balzacq et al., 2016; Balzacq, 2005; Léonard & Kaunert, 2011; Stritzel, 2014).

In China, securitizing speech acts legitimize policies, relying on the performative power of [official rhetoric and the state's authority rather than an open public consensus](#) (Kluver & Powers, 1999). This suggests that audiences can vary from public masses to international observers, and that securitization is a negotiation of meaning shaped by power relations and context (Biba, 2014; Jakimów, 2019; Vuori, 2008, 2023; Weil & Jing, 2012; Weil & Munteanu, 2020).

The official [UN General Assembly documents from the Eleventh Emergency Special Session](#) on Ukraine includes resolutions tabled during Emergency Special Session meetings, verbatim

records, and official meeting summaries. These documents provide a comprehensive record of China's official discourse on Ukraine war in a multilateral setting (UN, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e, 2022f, 2022g). Qualitative discourse analysis shows how China uses language to construct its position and justify its actions in the UN General Assembly. Analysis of China's choice of words, recurring themes, and argumentation strategies, provide insight into how China frames Ukraine conflict, and its role is disclosed.

China's statements were coded for moves that either securitize the narrative, emphasizing threats and confrontation, or desecuritize it by downplaying threats and urging normal political dialogue. [Desecuritization codes were applied to statements that attempted to move the discourse away from an existential security threat framing.](#) China's calls for direct dialogue, appeals for UN mediation, and references to peaceful settlement were all language aimed at treating the situation as a solvable political issue rather than an open-ended security emergency (UN, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e, 2022f, 2022g).

China's desecuritization strategies correlated with its framing of the conflict as a situation or issue rather than an aggression or war. China's most de-escalatory statements tended to use the mildest conflict descriptors. For example, China urged all parties to remain calm and pursue negotiations while calling the war a 'current situation in Ukraine.' This coupling is a Desecuritization and Framing link. China's preference for terms like '[the situation in Ukraine](#)' or '[the Ukraine issue](#)' is a downplaying or depoliticizing strategy (UN, 2022a, 2022b).

China consistently [professes respect for states' sovereignty and territorial integrity as a principle.](#) However, it integrates this with calls for peace in a nuanced manner. China's support for sovereignty is framed as part of an overall peace narrative, rather than a justification for punitive measures against Russia. This relationship code captured China's coupling of principle with approach: treating respect for territorial integrity as a reason to desecuritize (UN, 2022d, 2022e, 2022f).

China frequently mentions that [Russia has legitimate security concerns](#), implying that NATO's expansion and Western policies created a security threat for Russia. China's discourse often securitizes the issue by portraying it as a security dilemma triggered by NATO/US actions. This was usually in the context of defending its decision not to condemn Russia. China securitized NATO's actions as a threat to desecuritize the response (UN, 2022a, 2022b, 2022e).

China's statements sought to [give equal weight to two propositions](#): upholding the UN Charter principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity and taking seriously the reasonable security concerns of states. Chinese diplomats emphasized principles like sovereignty and territorial integrity in the abstract but equally stressed the importance of addressing Russia's legitimate security concerns (UN, 2022e).

China's voting behaviour and discourse in the [UN regarding Ukraine](#) conflict reflect a reluctance to participate in the securitizing coalition against Russia. Instead of aligning with the Western narrative of an existential threat posed by Russia's aggression, China has chosen a stance consistent with desecuritization tendencies. China's official discourse reinforces this interpretation, positioning itself as a neutral mediator.

Through the lens of securitization theory, China engages in a two-level discourse. Internationally, it deploys desecuritizing language regarding Ukraine war, urging ceasefire and negotiations, while securitizing the broader geopolitical context by highlighting the dangers of [NATO expansion and Cold War mentality](#). This duality reflects strategic ambiguity, allowing China to preserve its relationships with both Russia and Western states.

China's [security discourse](#) and diplomatic positioning are heavily shaped by [ideational factors, with deep-seated ideas, norms, and identities](#) influencing its response to security discourses (Kluver & Powers, 1999; Vuori, 2023; Weil, 2022; Weil & Munteanu, 2020). China's discourse in the UN General Assembly, demonstrating how it engages in both securitization and desecuritization simultaneously.

[Aktoty Aitzhanova](#) is a PhD student at the Antwerp Management School and University of Antwerp, conducting research in international security and multilateral diplomacy

[Prof. Dr. Stefanie Weil](#) is the Associate Dean for International Outreach and Academic Director at the Antwerp Management School and she is Professor of International Politics and Management at the University of Antwerp. Her research focuses on China and the Global Political Economy, international relations, diplomacy, and policy analysis.

[Prof. Christian Kaunert](#) is Professor of International Security at Dublin City University and Chair of Policing and Security at the University of South Wales. He is also Director of the International Centre for Policing and Security. His expertise lies in European security, terrorism studies, and international institutions

Reference List

- Andersson, P., von Essen, H., & Bohman, V. (2023). *China's and Russia's narratives on the war against Ukraine*. <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeu/chinas-and-russias-narratives-on-the-war-against-ukraine.pdf#:~:text=existing%20anti%02Western%20and%20pro,has%20served%20as%20an%20important>
- Balzacq, T., & Barnier-Khawam, P. (2020). Ideology and International Security. In (pp. 51-70). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-30512-3_4
- Balzacq, T., & Guzzini, S. (2015). Introduction: 'What kind of theory – if any – is securitization?'. *International Relations*, 29(1), 97-102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117814526606A>
- Balzacq, T., Léonard, S., & Ruzicka, J. (2016). 'Securitization' revisited: theory and cases. *International Relations*, 30(4), 494-531. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117815596590>
- Balzacq, T. (2005). The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context. *European Journal of International Relations*, 11(2), 171–201. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066105052960>

- Biba, S. (2014). Desecuritization in China's Behavior towards Its Transboundary Rivers: the Mekong River, the Brahmaputra River, and the Irtys and Ili Rivers. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 23(85), 21-43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.809975>
- Blank, S. (2022). Russia, China, and Information War against Ukraine. *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, 35(2), 39-72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45441287>
- Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2009). Macrosecuritisation and security constellations: reconsidering scale in securitisation theory. *Review of International Studies*, 35(02), 253-276. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509008511>
- Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (1997). Slippery? Contradictory? Sociologically untenable? The Copenhagen school replies. *Review of International Studies*, 23(2), 241-250. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210597002416>
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner.
- di Pennisi, A., & Chen, X. (2023). Strategic narratives of Russia's war in Ukraine: perspectives from China. *Policy Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2023.2276116>
- Eggen, K. (2022). Weaponized News: Russian Television, Strategic Narratives and Conflict Reporting. *Nordisk øst-forum*, 36(2022), 13-13. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noros.v36.3455>
- EU. (2023). *Factsheet EU sanctions against Russia*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs_22_1402.
- Farzanegan, M., & F. Gholipour, H. (2023). Russia's invasion of Ukraine and votes in favor of Russia in the UN General Assembly. *International Interactions*, 49(3), 454-470. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2023.2179046>
- Greitens, S. (2022). China's Response to War in Ukraine. *Asian Survey*, 62(5-6), 751-781. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2022.1807273>
- Haug, S., Foot, R., Baumann, M. . (2024). Power shifts in international organisations: China at the United Nations. . *Global Policy*, 15, 5-17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13368>
- Jakimów, M. (2019). Desecuritisation as a soft power strategy: the Belt and Road Initiative, European fragmentation and China's normative influence in Central-Eastern Europe. *Asia Europe Journal*, 17, 369-385. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-019-00561-3>
- Kluver, R., & Powers, J. (1999). *Civic Discourse, Civil Society, and Chinese Communities*. . Greenwood Publishing Group.

- Krivokhizh, S., & Soboleva, E. (2023). Strategic Narratives in China's Bid for Discursive Hegemony. *International Organisations Research Journal*.
<https://doi.org/10.17323/1996-7845-2023-02-09>
- Lam, S., & Fung, C. (2024). Mapping China's influence at the United Nations. *The Review of International Organizations*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-024-09571-2>
- Léonard, S., & Kaunert, C. (2011). Reconceptualizing the audience in securitization theory. In T. Balzacq (Ed.), *Securitization Theory, How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (pp. 57-76). Routledge
- Lukman, M., & Farique, M. (2024). The Russia-Ukraine War and the Global Balance of Power. In (Vol. 5, pp. 492-508).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs, C. (2023a). *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*. Beijing Retrieved from
https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/3265_665445/3250_664382/3251_664384/202302/t20230224_11030713.html
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs, C. (2023b). *Wang Yi: Everything China has Done is for Peace Talk*. Retrieved from
https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/3265_665445/3250_664382/3252_664386/202302/t20230220_11027348.html
- Putin, V. (2022). *Address by the President of Russian Federation on 24th of February 2022*
<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>, Official website of the President of Russian Federation.
- Sartoretti, T. (2022). Impact of the Ukrainian Conflict on US Relations with Countries in the Middle East. *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences*, 92(S15), S1397-S1404.
<https://doi.org/10.1134/s1019331622210055>
- Song, H. (2024). The Effect of Ukrainian War on the Global Economy, Politics, and International Relations. In (Vol. 4, pp. 184-188).
- Stefanović, J., & Popović, S. (2022). "A thousand miles" and "a thousand tasks": China's diplomatization of multifaceted Russia-Ukraine conflict and global security. In *The policy of national security*. Institute for Political Studies.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.22182/pnb.2322022.1>
- Stritzel, H. (2014). Securitization Theory and the Copenhagen School. In (pp. 11-37).
https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137307576_2
- UN. (2022a). *Eleventh Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly, 1st Plenary Meeting*. (A_ES-PV.1-EN). New York: United Nations Retrieved from
https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3967063/files/A_ES-11_PV.1-EN.pdf

- UN. (2022b). *Eleventh Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly, 5th Plenary Meeting*. (A_ES-PV.5-EN). New York: United Nations Retrieved from https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3968824/files/A_ES-11_PV.5-EN.pdf
- UN. (2022c). *Eleventh Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly, 9th Plenary Meeting*. (A_ES-PV.9-EN). New York: UN Retrieved from <https://digitallibrary.un.org>
- UN. (2022d). *Eleventh Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly, 10th Plenary Meeting*. (A_ES-PV.10-EN). New York: United Nations Retrieved from https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3972658/files/A_ES-11_PV.10-EN.pdf
- UN. (2022e). *Eleventh Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly, 14th Plenary Meeting*. (A_ES-PV.14-EN). New York: United Nations Retrieved from https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4000366/files/A_ES-11_PV.14-EN.pdf
- UN. (2022f). *Eleventh Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly, 15th Plenary Meeting*. (A_ES-PV.15-EN). New York: UN Retrieved from https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4000720/files/A_ES-11_PV.15-EN.pdf
- UN. (2022g). *Eleventh Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly, 19th Plenary Meeting*. (A_ES-PV.19-EN). New York: United Nations Retrieved from <https://digitallibrary.un.org>
- Vuori, J. (2008). Illocutionary Logic and Strands of Securitization: Applying the Theory of Securitization to the Study of Non-Democratic Political Orders. *European Journal of International Relations*, 14(1), 65-99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066107087767>
- Vuori, J. (2023). *Chinese Macrosecuritization, China's Alignment in Global Security Discourses*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Weil, S. (2022). China's discourse on the belt and road initiative: a hidden threat to European security logic? *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2022.2068516>
- Weil, S., & Jing, Y. (2012). The EU and China's Perceptions of Democracy and Their Impact on China-EU Relations. In Z. Pan (Ed.), *Conceptual Gaps in China-EU Relations: Global Governance, Human Rights and Strategic Partnerships* (pp. 113-127). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137027443_8
- Weil, S., & Munteanu, D. (2020). The Belt and Road Initiative, A Pathway to World Leadership? In D. Cremer, B. McKern, & J. McGuire (Eds.), *The Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities and Challenges of a Chinese Economic Ambition*. SAGE Publications Pvt. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4135/9789353885922>