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To What Extent Does China's Increasing Influence in the Black Sea Region Promote Stability?

By Wing Commander Sarah McDonnell

Biography: Wing Commander Sarah McDonnell joined the Royal Air Force as a Fighter Controller, specialising as a weapons controller. She has completed several operational tours, including an exchange tour with the Royal Navy, and is a qualified Air Battlespace Manager. Latterly an E-7 Wedgetail programme manager, she graduated from the Advanced Staff Course in 2021 and will take command of Number 8 Squadron at RAF Lossiemouth, following operational conversion training on to the E-7 Wedgetail with the Royal Australian Air Force.

Abstract: China's economic expansionism through its Belt and Road and 17+1 initiatives has enhanced its influence in the Black Sea Region (BSR). Despite the inherency of regional instability, this influence has brought economic stability by providing alternatives to Russian investment, encouraging domestic development, and stimulating investment from the EU and US. China's growing status as a global power, and increasingly strong relationship and influence with Russia, has provided stability in deterring Russian aggression, although more complex in the longer-term. This paper considers China's geopolitical relationships with Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and Bulgaria, assessing its influence on stability, highlighting examples of China the investor, China the deterrent and China the intermediary. Whilst the Ukraine war has irrevocably altered the geopolitical dynamics of the region, if China continues to play the mediator, carefully balancing its relationship with the US and its asymmetric relationship with Russia, it will likely maintain its influence. Thus, in the long term, China is likely to promote stability in the BSR.

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Section 1

Introduction and Context Introduction

China is almost a global superpower and continues to grow across all facets of state power. Whether the future of China follows Pompeo's prediction of an 'authoritarian nightmare, intent on destroying democracy'¹ or Jinping's attempt to paint the 'quaint picture of Chinese pacifism,'² the realist, and to some extent liberalist view³ suggest that the Western Liberal International Order (LIO) is in decline, within which China is a likely contender to US hegemony.⁴ China's most obvious challenge to hegemony, has been through its growing economy, which has afforded it the economic power to be more assertive within the global economy. China now has the world's second largest economy, 'accounting for over 12 per cent of global trade and 15.5 per cent of the world's GDP.'⁵ Indeed, Magalhães argues that China has become a 'globaliser'⁶ in that it is able to 'affect the increase or decrease of globalism and shape its characteristics.'⁷ To date, this expansion has been somewhat limited within Europe, however, under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), coupled with an increasing desire to access European markets, the Black Sea Region (BSR) has become a new area of interest.

It follows, that this paper does not contend the proposition that China does have influence within the BSR. Sanders, as one of the leading commentators proposes that through the BRI, China has increased its 'economic and political influence'⁸ and has become an 'important player in the region.'⁹ The 'economic weight, as the world's largest trading power'¹⁰ and its global influence as a permanent member of the UN Security Council means that China has significant 'political leverage'¹¹ and thus even relatively modest investments in the BSR (compared to central Asia for example) have a disproportionate influence on the geopolitical environment.

This paper will evaluate the impact of this influence and examine to what extent it has been able to promote stability and whether it will continue to promote stability in the future. Although Western literature is somewhat limited, Sanders suggests that through economic investment, China is able to offer a counter to Russian investment, stimulate domestic growth, and draw continued Western investment into the region, all of which provide economic stability. Further, owing to China's growing status as a global power, and its increasing relationship with Russia, this influence, for the most part, has also been able to provide stability in deterring Russian aggression.¹² Ghisay and Zhou support this position, stating the BRI has the 'potential to support the conditions for stability... [if it can] foster inclusive and sustainable socioeconomic growth,'¹³ and stimulate 'greater cooperative efforts... to address common security threats.'¹⁴ However, they also state that it could be a source of instability by exacerbating political instability and adding financial risks.¹⁵ Other literature suggests it could add friction to an already fraught region¹⁶ (Russia-Ukraine and Russia- Georgia wars are cases in point) as the addition of further competition increases the likelihood of misperception of intent, and thus decrease stability should this result in retaliation.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section, beyond the introduction, aims to contextualise the subject of China in the BSR. Specifically, it discusses the cause of instability, why the BSR is of strategic importance and China's BRI. It will show that Russia, due to its strategic culture and its perception of an existential threat through NATO expansionism, is the root cause of instability. It will then discuss how the BSR, at the confluence of major global trade routes, has developed into a region of renewed great power competition, within which China is evolving as a key competitor. This section concludes by evaluating China's BRI and discusses its strategy for the BSR. The second section considers China's geopolitical relationships with the littoral states of the BSR, focusing on Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and Bulgaria. For each it will outline the extent of China's BRI investment and discuss its immediate impact on state stability, as well as considering the long-term impact of Chinese influence in terms of how coalescing or antagonistic this may become within the future geopolitical situation.

For Russia, it discusses the complexities of their relationship with China, particularly noting the current Ukraine war. Ultimately, the asymmetry between an increasingly powerful China and a declining Russia enables China to exercise some control over Russian actions in the region, including acting as both a deterrent (in Georgia) and a mediator (in Ukraine) against military aggression. For Ukraine, despite significant investment which has provided economic stability, the war has shown that China lacks the absolute ability to temper Russia, suggesting that China's influence has limitations for stability. For Georgia, it will show how China's investment has provided stability by prompting US economic investment, limiting Russian influence. Unlike Ukraine, the sustainability of this arrangement is likely to endure, although the coexistence of China and the US in the same geography may cause friction if China attempts to translate economic influence into geopolitical dominance. Finally, for Bulgaria, counter to the proposition of this question, it will highlight that China's influence has been limited, owing to Bulgaria's membership of NATO and the EU. As a result, China has had limited opportunity to promote stability, however, in light of the Ukraine war, China may look to exploit Russian unpopularity which could increase its economic influence, and by deduction, its ability to promote stability.

The third section will conclude that China's influence in the BSR does promote stability, albeit this is not absolute and is complex. China's ability to have a long-term stabilising effect will be determined by its ability to balance its national interests whilst also maintaining its relationship with the West and managing an asymmetric relationship with Russia. The war in Ukraine will undoubtedly complicate China's ability to achieve this, and whilst the full determination of China's part in the aftermath is yet to be realised, the reassertion of US dominance into the BSR may limit China's options and therefore its means to promote stability. Here, China's actions may prove deterministic. If it remains neutral, carefully balancing its position as a mediator, it may secure its long-term influence, and therefore its ability to promote stability. Whilst economic power and influence certainly translate into geopolitical influence, Western security assurance will likely be the stronger deterrent against Russian

aggression. Therefore, until such time that China can also compete militarily, the stabilising nature of China in the BSR in the long-term may be limited.

Methodology, Scope, Assumptions and Limitations

There is limited academic literature on China's activity within the BSR, therefore, a full literature review would yield fairly narrow analysis. Further, as much of the existing discussion has only been published within public discourse, peer review of the content is unlikely. This is particularly evident in the discussions surrounding the current Ukraine crisis. To mitigate bias of opinion, this paper has targeted arguments that are either corroborated or published by credible sources. The result, however, is that the analysis has had to be more expansive, drawing conclusions from peripheral geopolitical debates in lieu of direct evidence. Specifically, the extrapolation of literature that discusses China, Russia and Western relationships has been used to ascertain the likelihood of stability in the BSR based on observed interactions between these powers in other areas.

There are six littoral states within the BSR of which this paper explores China's relationships with Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and Bulgaria, as each of their engagements with China are all subtly different and thus offer the richness of a full discussion. Romania and Turkey are out of scope.

Romania has already firmly chosen West over East, resulting in negligible Chinese influence, thus offering little value to this discussion.¹⁷ Turkey, however, would overpower the discussion in terms of the volume of analysis. The amalgamation of its strong Chinese allegiance, its continuing dependence on Russia, its NATO membership, its declining relationship with the West and its custodian responsibility of the Montreux convention has generated a powerful geopolitical status.¹⁸ Thus, to try and analyse the stabilising impact of China's influence in Turkey would require a far fuller argument than could be made within this paper.

This paper will focus on China's influence through its economic power. Whilst the use of diplomatic power and subthreshold activity could provide valuable discussion, China, through the BRI, has used economic power as its primary lever of influence; examining through this lens is likely to provide the most tangible evidence for the impact on stability. This paper also works on the premise, as argued by Wagner and Deller, that a strong economy is a key proponent of stability; 'as a region's economy becomes more diversified, it becomes less sensitive to fluctuations caused by factors outside the region...[and] promotes stability.'¹⁹ Furthermore, whilst acknowledging Nye's statement that, 'economic strength has not replaced military security,'²⁰ this paper predominately focusses on economic power and influence. Noting, that for now, China's main interest in the BSR has been economic.

Context

The source of instability

Valinakis describes the BSR as inherently prone to conflict owing to the collapse of the Soviet Union, issues over territorial claims and ethnically driven animosity.²¹ Kuimov and Wezeman

concur, describing the region as an 'unpredictable and high-risk environment.'²² Russia can be considered the common denominator for this instability, predominately as a derivative of its strategic culture. Whilst the full extent of Russia's strategic culture will not be discussed in this paper, its history, geography, and Putin are some of the key components which dictate Russian action. 'Defensiveness bordering on paranoia on one hand, combined with assertiveness bordering on pugnacity, on the other;'²³ this potent mix of psychology has repeatedly caused Russia to challenge in the physical, virtual, and cognitive domains within the BSR, all of which result in instability as these actions threaten the sovereignty of the targeted state. Putin considers NATO expansionism (12 to 30 states since 1949) to be a significant threat to Russia. Within the region, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey are all members perpetuating Russia's threat perception,²⁴ aggravated by the belief that the BSR is firmly within its sphere of influence. Although in his discussion, Sankey states that 'conceptually, spheres of influence are security-enhancing because they serve as buffers to secure vital interests,'²⁵ this assumed deterrence, is reliant on a recognition and acceptance of their boundaries by other great powers, essentially making them 'spheres of restraint.'²⁶ Whilst this arrangement held in the Cold War, the BSR does not enjoy the same neutrality. Thus, the myriad of influences in an area where Russia thinks it should dominate has already laid the foundations of instability. With the entrenched need to protect itself, Russia believes it is able to justify aggressive behaviour as defensive.²⁷ According to Russia, the wars with Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2022), as well as the alleged cyber-attacks and spread of disinformation throughout the region,²⁸ have all been 'necessary to prevent the strategic balance from shifting decisively in NATO's favour.'²⁹ Putin is also keen to 'stoke fissures between alliance members along the Black Sea,'³⁰ and uses influence gained through energy ties as a 'geopolitical weapon.'³¹ The West, as the traditional competitor in the region, has aimed to maintain regional stability through diplomacy and engagement with Russia, as well as providing the BSR states with military support.³² For China, the composition of its economic influence and its relationship with Russia, should dampen the threat of Russian induced instability; however, in the long-term, until such time when China can exercise the full suite of state power (diplomatic, military etc), it may find that its economic influence, and stabilising nature therein, has limits.

Why the Black Sea Region?

The BSR is a region of strategic importance due to its geographical link between Europe and Asia and the Middle East.³³ As such it has become a scene of renewed great power competition between Russia, China and the West. 'Consequently, instability, the potential for conflict, its resources and its economic prospects matter to the [entire] international community,'³⁴ although interestingly the perceived merits of influence in this region are subtly different for Russia and China in the context of its intentions for Eurasia. Russia needs the BSR 'to build a shell round itself to ensure its strategic security,' whilst 'China... sees the future of Eurasia as a vast corridor of trade.'³⁵ Russia, historically has been the biggest player in the region and 'has long seen the Black Sea as essential for projecting power and influence in to the Mediterranean and beyond.'³⁶ In forcing economic and energy

dependence, coupled with the threat of military action, Russia hopes it can secure allegiance, and deter further NATO expansion.³⁷ China, however, only see opportunity for further economic growth. Over the past 10 years the European Union (EU) has worked to deepen economic ties with China with a view to securing better access to Chinese markets. China has also made significant inroads to the BSR, through its 17+1³⁸ programme and its BRI, and is 'now the EU's biggest trading partner, [having] overtaken the US in 2020.'³⁹ Thus, the region is ripe for continued Chinese expansion. To some extent, Russian and Chinese intentions are mutually supportive in that each aims to reduce Western influence, however, Russian aggression 'may re-strengthen Euro-Atlantic ties and fracture China's ability to keep trade flowing...into Europe.'⁴⁰ Consequently, the region is likely to become more unstable, as these intentions compete. Ultimately, 'China wants to open the space...Russia wants to close it.'⁴¹ For the West, the region can be viewed as an extension to the aims of US strategy since the end of the First World War; to ensure that 'no single state or coalition of states would dominate either Europe or East Asia.'⁴² The contenders have varied; East Germany, Russia and now China, however the strategy of building a strong, neoliberal alliance through which to preserve the LIO continues to be a 'top geostrategic priority for the United States.'⁴³

China's Belt and Road Initiative

Coupled with the 17+1 mechanism, China's expansion under the BRI is likely to have significant impact in the BSR. Announced in 2013 by Jinping, the BRI is often referred to as a rejuvenation of the historic silk road,⁴⁴ and aims to provide China with increased economic corridors through investment in infrastructure. There is also hope of 'reduced physical and political barriers to trade [which should] open new markets for exporters and foster regional security through enhanced cooperation.'⁴⁵ Undeniably, improvements in infrastructure and increased connectivity are welcome investments for BSR states as they continue their growth post the collapse of the Soviet Union. Further, the digital silk road has been announced which aims to improve global connectivity through the export of communication technologies.⁴⁶ Although out of scope for this paper, the implications of this initiative are likely to yield even more complex outcomes for geopolitics as the traditional concepts of terrain and territory become increasingly obsolete.

Beyond economic gain, literature that discusses the long-term intent of the BRI is varied. Wang Jisi, China's most prominent and influential international relations scholar, described the Strategy as China's 'March West' in response to the US pivot to the South China Sea.⁴⁷ China, however, has said the BRI promises to offer benefits beyond China's borders, with no 'geopolitical gains, beyond the reputational benefits'⁴⁸ of the BRI. Carminati corroborates this statement, stating China's intent is 'firstly economic and only secondly ideological and political.'⁴⁹ In contrast, some Western critics, see the BRI as China's push to challenge the LIO; an initiative that could see developing countries indebted to China in order to 'gain strategic assets through "debt-trap diplomacy".'⁵⁰ China's investment in the Hambantota Port Development in Sri Lanka, for example. When Sri Lanka could not repay China for its

investment in Hambantota Port, they had to agree to 'sell an 80% stake [of]...the port to China,'⁵¹ further expanding China's sphere of access and influence.

Whilst such negative connotations of the BRI exist, China's biggest limitation in successful implementation of the initiative is its lack of transparency and its inability to harness soft power relationships.⁵² Culturally and ideologically China still stands as an outsider to neoliberalism. Despite China's attempt to reconcile its image,⁵³ Orientalism⁵⁴ still resonates globally; cognitively therefore, China still has some way before it presents an attractive alternative to Russia for the BSR. In the short-term therefore, the BRI will likely remain as a mechanism for economic investment. However, China's increasing global power, will likely mean that this economic influence gives China disproportionate geopolitical influence, thereby increasing its ability to promote stability within the BSR.

Section 2

China's Geopolitical Relationships China-Russia

China and Russia 'are joined not by ideology, but the avoidance of it.'⁵⁵ Under Putin and Jinping, common objectives, such as their antipathy to liberal values and their ambition to challenge the LIO, has seen their relationship mature, and strengthen. Recently the two leaders declared that their relationship has 'no limits.'⁵⁶ However, scholars such as Sutter, are not so optimistic for the future of this unconditionality. He suggests that 'economic asymmetry...limits on arms sales and defense cooperation...[and a] divergence of foreign relations'⁵⁷ create 'unevenness in their relationship,'⁵⁸ sowing resentment in Russia and caution in China, both of which may hamper their continued cooperation.

Economic asymmetry is likely the greatest source of tension; Russia is certainly the dependent junior partner. A declining Russia and a growing China has allowed China to dominate the relationship economically, from which it has also yielded geopolitical influence.⁵⁹ This dynamic is likely to become more prevalent as Russia navigates out of economic decline, exacerbated by recent sanctions; China is likely to become Russia's lifeline.

However, China's response to the war may prove deterministic for the future of the relationship. On the one hand, as China has not openly condemned the invasion and abstained from the UN General Assembly vote,⁶⁰ this could be evidence of the 'no limits' narrative and a message to the West of the strength of this partnership. Alternatively, this could be less because they owe Russia political allegiance, and more because China needs to maintain a good relationship with Russia to exploit their increased dependence on China and secure opportunity to fill Russian investment voids without fear of Russian retaliation. Furthermore, noting China's strong view on territorial integrity, abstinence could be viewed as China effectively condoning Russia's actions. Indeed, it will likely be 'interpreted [by the West] as China's indirect support for Russia's use of military force.'⁶¹ China will, however, most likely wish to avoid such blatant support for Russia, to avoid being subject to secondary

sanctions,⁶² or risk their already fragile reputation. However, to the contrary the abstention could be seen as China isolating Russia and signalling its disapproval.

China, however, persist that they remain neutral.⁶³ With the interdependency of the two states, coupled with the regional and global implications as a result of the war, China is currently striking a careful balance, exercising patience with Russia on one side and the West on the other before it acts decisively in the BSR. For the BSR, perceptions will be important. If the BSR states perceive China to be siding with Russia, then this will likely frame their interaction with China, and it is unlikely to be positive.

For Russia, as a consequence of its aggressive action in Syria and Ukraine, its cooperation with its near abroad, including the BSR has lost momentum.⁶⁴ This may mean they are willing to accept further Chinese economic expansion as a compromise for its own economic support from the East, as well as acceptance that if it is unable to hold economic or political influence in the region, it would rather China, over the US fill the void.

Other opportunities for China as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war could be China's ability to influence Russian military sales. In return for supporting Russia, China may demand access to Russia's top military equipment, especially, 'submarine and air-defence technology.'⁶⁵ They may also pressure Russia to limit sales to China's rivals, such as Vietnam and India.⁶⁶ There is also literature to suggest that Russia will be more malleable to China if they remain 'strategic partners' against the West. This could see China benefit from strategically positioned locations in Russia, notably the Arctic.⁶⁷ Whilst this may not immediately impact stability in the BSR, as China's hold over Russia increases, they will become even more subservient, which in turn will play out in all regions where the two countries have cooperation and influence. For the BSR, this is likely to increase stability in the near term as China capitalises on a weakened Russia. China's increased influence over Russia and within the BSR will limit Russia's aggressiveness in the region.

In summary, the increasingly asymmetrical relationship between China and Russia, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine is likely to subordinate Russia to subservience, at least in the short-term. For the BSR, this exaggerated influence beyond the BRI should mean an increase in stability. China favours a secure environment to foster economic growth, thus, with a stronger influence over Russia in the BSR, it should be able to curtail any suggestion of future or enduring aggression. Further, as the BSR states denounce Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequently withdraw from Russian influence, China is likely to be an increasingly attractive investment partner, which should increase economic stability and thicken the buffer to Russian influence. This, however, is dependent on the palatability of China's continued support for Russia, and whether renewed Western favourability to assure security offers China any opportunity for continued economic influence. Geopolitically, the asymmetric power relationship between China and Russia could make the BSR more of a stable environment. The war in Ukraine undoubtedly presents China with an opportunity to act as a stabilising mediator. If China,

through the deepening dependence of Russia, can curtail Russian aggression, limit subthreshold activity, whilst maintaining a healthy relationship, China, without considering the impact of individual state actions and responses, has the potential to promote long-term regional stability.

China-Ukraine

China's relationship with Ukraine has strengthened since 1991,⁶⁸ and 'by 2019, China had replaced Russia as Ukraine's largest trading partner.'⁶⁹ Further, since 2017 an estimated \$3bn has been invested in construction contracts under the BRI. Specifically, ports in Mariupol, Yuzhny and Chornomorsk have all seen large-scale investment.⁷⁰ These, coupled with the development of transport infrastructure, led Zelensky to announce in 2021 that 'he hoped Ukraine would become a bridge to Europe for Chinese business.'⁷¹ Outside of the BRI, agriculture and defence industries have also seen Chinese investment.⁷² Ukraine is now China's largest supplier of corn,⁷³ and China's development of its 'first aircraft carrier... is a refurbished Soviet carrier purchased from Ukraine.'⁷⁴ Generally, this economic investment, and thereby influence is seen as a stabilising factor. It acts as a catalyst for domestic development; promotes economic growth which attracts other investors and offers alternatives to Russian investment tempering Russian influence.

However, the impact of this influence on stability is fragile. Firstly, China's investment may not be economically sustainable. Secondly China's decision making may fuel geopolitical instability, and Russia has proven that, in Ukraine specifically, China is unable to deter Russian territorial and geopolitical ambitions. In terms of sustainable economic stability, even before the war, concerns over Ukrainian entrenchment with Chinese investment, meant it was at risk of becoming a 'hidden debtor'⁷⁵ to China. Revelations of debt could degrade investor confidence and the Ukrainian government may need to shoulder the remainder,⁷⁶ both of which risk economic stability. Although Gelpert suggests that lending could be serviced 'through the proceeds of commodity exports,'⁷⁷ although, the destruction of Ukraine and the ongoing naval blockade are unlikely to make this viable. Thus, China's economic influence, which promoted stability prior to the war, may potentially become a source of instability post the war. For commentators who argue that the BRI serves to 'debt trap' the invested states and allow China to exploit the dependency for geostrategic gain, Ukraine is quickly becoming an acute example. Post the pandemic, as China grapples with an overstretched lending portfolio, it may have to rebalance its existing, and curtail future lending,⁷⁸ potentially affecting BRI investments. China's investment could become destabilising for economic stability if China is unable to sustain its lending.

China's decision making over existing investments could also prevent its influence from continuing to promote stability. As discussed, China has long hailed that the BRI exists solely for economic gain.⁷⁹ However analysts such as Chang⁸⁰ and Cai⁸¹ contend that the BRI is a tenet of grand strategy designed to reassert China's dominance in pursuit of multipolarity. Ukraine may be the test case to ascertain China's true intent. If the BRI is solely to generate economic wealth, China could well curtail its investment in Ukraine in favour of more

economically settled environments. In this scenario, China's abandonment coupled with the already muted nature of China's condemnation against Russia could lead Russia to perceive its ambivalence as acceptance, cementing the no limits narrative and consenting to continued Russian aggression. China's action and its lack of sustained economic investment thus becomes destabilising and potentially prolong the war. However, if the BRI is indeed a tool for global dominance, and it continues to support its investments in Ukraine, the sustainability of its stabilising nature is more complicated. Pursuing Ukrainian investments with at least some conscious knowledge that this is likely to engender debt, may result in regional criticism and confirm Western suspicions that the BRI is a tool for geopolitical dominance. Alternatively, continuing to support Ukrainian investment could play to its cooperation narrative, as per the headline of Jinping's speech to the United Nations in 2017,⁸² and therefore enable sustained stability. China's decision making in Ukraine is therefore key. Seeking alternative investment may curtail its stabilising nature and prolong the war. Persisting in its investment may on the one hand allow for a cooperation narrative and aid stability, in contrast, maintaining economic investment in the face of expected economic loss, could confirm Western nervousness of China's long-term intent to challenge US hegemony making long-term stability less likely.

Ukraine is unlikely to simply play the onlooker and its action towards China may affect whether China's influence can promote continued stability. Sanders highlights that prior to the war, Ukraine had a difficult task in balancing its East vs West allegiances.⁸³ Post the war however, despite Zelensky's frustrations with NATO's rejection of a no-fly zone,⁸⁴ he is likely to emphasise his relationship with the West in order to assure continued security support. Thus, China becomes the losing partner with limited ability to promote stability in future. Further, Ukraine may find it unpalatable to continue its engagement with China, should China continue to support Russia.⁸⁵ Again, in this case, China will likely lose its influence in Ukraine and therefore cannot continue to promote stability.

Finally, the Ukraine war has potentially proven that China may have limited ability to deter Russian territorial and geopolitical ambitions. Although there is some suggestion that Putin made Jinping aware of his intentions, it is unclear whether he was seeking Jinping's approval; thus, potentially giving Jinping influence, or whether Putin was simply informing Jinping of his plans.⁸⁶ Owing to the escalatory NATO-Russian rhetoric in November-December 2021, it is likely to be the latter. To that end, the assumption made throughout this paper could be irrevocably flawed, as despite the significant Chinese investment in Ukraine, it seemingly held insufficient deterrence against Russian aggression. It would follow therefore, that China's influence does not promote stability in the BSR as Russia has proven it will prioritise countering NATO over the preservation of its relationship with China. However, this seems naïve. Russia's miscalculations in the strength of the Ukrainian response, and/or the severity of Western sanctions has made China their 'lifeline'. The criticality of that dependency should provide strength against future aggression in the BSR. Further, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian control of the Kerch Strait and the 18 Ukrainian ports (more than double the

amount located in any other BSR state), suggests that Ukraine is sufficiently important to Russia to justify conflict, whereas other BSR states might not be. On this basis, the conclusion for China's stability in the BSR has four avenues. Russia is unlikely to act with the same aggression again in other BSR states and thus China's influence is immaterial for stability, the Russian dependency allows China to become more assertive over Russia, curtailing any future aggression and ensuring long-term stability, China becomes excluded from the region as the West increase their military presence, meaning its influence is inconsequential, or NATO and the US realise that China is the only real contender for 'mediation' and thus its level of influence becomes a critical dependency for regional stability. Of these, the latter is potentially the most likely for the BSR.

In summary, prior to the war China's influence likely aided stability in Ukraine. Significant investments allowed for alternatives to Russian investment and the investments themselves fuelled domestic growth. However, following the conflict, China is likely to lose its ability to maintain stability in Ukraine. The severity of the West vs Russia conflict will have overshadowed any ability for China to maintain influence, its decision making against existing investments will likely result in mixed messages as to its intent, and Ukraine may itself denounce China if it continues to support Russia. All of which removes China and its stabilising influence in the long-term. Alternatively, the resultant dependency of Russia on China following the war, and China's role as a mediator may allow China's influence to continue to promote regional stability in the long-term, even if this excludes Ukraine.

China-Georgia

Since Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union, China has slowly increased its relationship with Georgia. This has largely been through economic investment with cooperation now at its peak.⁸⁷ In 2021, Georgia exported more to China than any other country, totalling \$615 million.⁸⁸ Georgia's geographic position in the BSR, coupled with its border with Azerbaijan providing a land route to the Caucasus without the need to use Iran or Russia, makes Georgia of strategic importance to China's BRI.⁸⁹

Some literature suggests that China's interest in Georgia has also had a positive effect on US economic commitments.⁹⁰ Although the Foreign Policy for Research Institution describes the trend as 'somewhat counterintuitive',⁹¹ owing to the US 'pivot' to Asia,⁹² and Smolnik, a Senior Associate in Eastern European and Eurasia research, describes the US-Georgia relationship as lacking in a strategic vision;⁹³ this support could well be a manifestation of US grand strategy. The US is quickly realising that 'as competition with China becomes increasingly central to US grand strategy, the US is likely to look at different regions. . . through the lens of that competition.'⁹⁴ As such, Georgia has been able to use its developing relationship with China 'to boost Georgia's strategic. . . partnership with Washington.'⁹⁵ Georgia's 'strategy' is therefore win-win. Chinese investment increases their economic stability and attracts US economic and security assurances. Further, China's engagement specifically counters Russia's involvement; it is able to 'limit Russia's freedom of manoeuvre and will begin

to mitigate its geostrategic dominance.⁹⁶ In the short-term, if the principles of economic liberalism (economic interdependence reduces the likelihood of hostility as the cost of disruption outweighs the justification for conflict)⁹⁷ holds, China and US co-habitancy is likely to assure stability, unless this coexistence becomes problematic. 'According to power transition theory, the onset of war between a dominant and a rising power grows more likely as the gap in relative strength between them narrows and the latter's grievances with the existing order move beyond any hope of peaceful resolution.'⁹⁸ Whilst neither side has shown any intention of aggression in the region, an increasingly powerful China coupled with resultant US uneasiness, could lead to tension, potentially causing China's influence to negatively affect stability. Brands, in his discussion of ideological competition between China and the US, argues that autocracy vs democracy is a line of great power competition which, in the long-term will not simply resolve.⁹⁹ Whilst the realisation of this tension is unlikely to result in military conflict both because the foreign policy on each side favours diplomacy, and because Georgia is unlikely to be revered as a cause over which each side should go to war; any suggestion of subthreshold activity between the US and China in Georgia may limit the sustainability of China's stabilising influence in the long-term, should it feel that its position becomes untenable.

Nonetheless, China will likely want to retain its investment in Georgia for as long as is feasible, as without NATO or EU membership, China still has room for significant influence. China's ability to promote stability in the long-term will be dependent on how attractive it becomes as an investor and thereby how much influence it can yield over other actors. Russia likely believes that Georgia should remain firmly within its sphere of influence, and the 2008 war clearly signalled 'their determination to prevent further expansion of the Alliance into former Soviet republics.'¹⁰⁰ Indeed since the war, the 'Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions are still under Russian occupation'¹⁰¹ and although written in a US policy paper, Welt claims that since the war, 'Russia has used a variety of means to undermine and challenge Georgia's security, including... establishing military bases, and reinforcing their military strength.'¹⁰² Georgia, acutely aware of the Russian threat, has ensured that the US remain its security guarantor and when Wang Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister, visited Georgia in 2019, the importance of seeking 'Chinese support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity'¹⁰³ was raised, potentially indicating that Georgia expects China to become a strategic ally as well as an economic investor. China's investment in Georgia therefore complicates this power play for which Russian action in response to China's growing influence may test the limits of the current stability. China's investment in Belarus may give some indication of Russia's temperament. As well as BRI investments, China invested a \$500bn 'general loan' into Belarus after Russia's Eurasian Fund for Stabilisation and Development refused to pay a \$200M instalment of a \$2bn loan,¹⁰⁴ which saw a negligible response from Russia suggesting that even investments outside of the BRI curtail rather than aggravate Russian aggression. Although Russia undoubtedly would like to counter China's investment, it 'does not have the deep pockets to match Beijing's,'¹⁰⁵ thus, it must accept interventions, even in states with long standing socio-political ties to Russia. It would seem that China's economic investment could have significant resilience for assuring stability against Russia in Georgia.

The final test against China's stability in Georgia may be realised in analysing Russia's likely intent post the Ukraine crisis. Some commentary has suggested that the risk of Russian escalation has increased.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, fearing invasion, 'the Georgian government has tiptoed round the crisis,' and filed for EU membership on 03 March 2022. In the event of military action, China is unlikely and probably unwilling to intervene, clearly limiting its ability to promote stability. However, if Russia pursued military intervention, China's inaction may act as a stabilising factor as any action that directly disrupts China's BRI may cause Russia to fall out of favour with China,¹⁰⁷ something Russia can ill afford. By proxy therefore, China may now be able to temper Russian aggression in Georgia even in a heightened escalatory environment.

In summary, China's influence is likely to promote stability in Georgia in both the short and long term. China's economic investment and resultant US investment has provided Georgia with a win-win strategy for countering Russian aggression. Further, China has been able to expand its investment beyond construction and thus has proven it can act with impunity without Russian retaliation, proving the significance of China's influence as a stabilising factor. Though the threat of Russian occupation has potentially heightened following the war and the long-term co-habitancy of the US and China in a small geographic space may give rise to future tension, these are unlikely to result in large scale conflict.

China-Bulgaria

Bulgarian geopolitical relationships are complex. Traditionally a strong ally of Russia; however, since joining NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007, it has continued to establish and uphold strong relations with the West, owing to its reliance on financial and economic security from the EU.

China, a 'geopolitical latecomer to Bulgaria,'¹⁰⁸ has found it difficult to gain influence in the country due to Bulgaria's NATO/EU membership, and legacy Russian influence. This is beginning to change. China realises the potential of using Bulgaria as a 'logistics and transportation hub into Europe,'¹⁰⁹ and as Bulgaria is one of only two states within the region to officially be a member of the 17+1 construct, it offers China a particular advantage.¹¹⁰ As such, since 2016, BRI investments have been forthcoming. The ports of Burgas and Varna have seen large scale investment, as well as multiple commitments to improve transport infrastructure more generally (a tunnel under the Balkan mountains and investments in Plovdiv airport are examples).¹¹¹ This investment has acted as a catalyst for commitment to a domestically led ambitious transport strategy, in order to accommodate the likely increase in maritime traffic.¹¹²

Despite these investments and public announcements to continue to 'lift China-Bulgaria relations to a strategic partnership,'¹¹³ in real terms, China holds little influence in the macroeconomy, which is dominated by the EU. Bulgaria trades in excess of 60% of both its exports and imports with the EU, compared to a maximum of 3% with China.¹¹⁴

Although Shopov, a visiting fellow of the European Council on Foreign Relations, does document a compelling suite of investments and engagements beyond the infrastructure and energy sectors, citing examples in cultural, educational, agricultural and research projects.¹¹⁵ The aggregate effect however, has seen little movement away from the EU. This is unsurprising as 'the availability of EU funds for primary infrastructure... remains sufficient and comes at little or no cost to the Bulgarian exchequer.'¹¹⁶ As such, in the near-term, and counter to the proposition of this paper, China lacks influence in Bulgaria limiting its ability to promote stability.

However, the war in Ukraine has affected Bulgaria's relationship with Russia for which China may exploit. Interestingly, unlike other European countries that are punishing Russia, Russia has punished Bulgaria.¹¹⁷ In failing to meet Russian demands to pay for natural gas in roubles (knowing that this is against sanction regulations), GazProm turned off Bulgarian gas supply¹¹⁸ for which the Energy Minister, Nikolov's, response was to suggest that 'natural gas is being used... as a political... weapon.'¹¹⁹ Russia knows that European dependency on Russian gas gives them leverage, and although Nikolov has a resolute tone, he is also mindful of the need to carefully balance Russia's perception of Bulgaria such to prevent further aggression; 'my heart says we do not leave Ukraine alone... [but]... I don't think I can send Bulgarian planes flying over Ukraine, fighting with Russian jets.'¹²⁰ Indeed, in terms of support to Ukraine, Bulgaria has pledged humanitarian support but not weapons.¹²¹ This changing dynamic potentially puts China in a precarious position. It also needs to balance Russian and EU interests in Bulgaria to ensure its economic growth goes unhindered. It has learned from its investments in Central Asia that it can comfortably co-habit with Russia in an economic sense,¹²² however, although Russia looks like it is content with dismemberment from Bulgaria, it may well be relying on China to fill the void to prevent deeper EU dominance. In this case, China's increasing influence could remain a vector for future stability. Indeed, there has already been some illustrative evidence of this when in 2019, China's bid to restart development on the previously abandoned Russian nuclear facility in Belene,¹²³ yielded negligible Russian reactions. However, as the trade statistics show, and the post war trend to turn Westwards, China may find its influence shrinking. In this instance, Russia loses its ally, and the perception of NATO expansion strengthens. Whilst this is unlikely to result in Russian vs Western conflict (owing to Bulgaria's NATO membership), an environment with decreasing Chinese influence could encourage Russia to pursue persistent subthreshold activity as a means to exploit Bulgarian nervousness and prevent Western absolutism. China is unlikely to intervene as Bulgaria is a small state and already a member of NATO and the EU, and as such China may lack motivation to act as a mediator. Thus, with a decreasing influence, its ability to promote stability also declines. However, as Shopov highlights, a significant part of China's investment strategy has been to consider sub-national ties, exploiting the 'stalled process of fiscal decentralisation'¹²⁴ to local municipalities. Fostering pro-Chinese sentiment from the ground up may help China retain its influence and thereby its ability to promote stability in demonstrating to Russia that these relationships can temper further NATO concreting, ultimately reducing the likelihood of Russian aggression.

In summary, although against the premise of this paper, China has struggled to grow influence in Bulgaria, limiting its ability to promote stability. Bulgaria, as a member of the EU and NATO has limited need for Chinese investment and post the war in Ukraine, this Western preference is likely to strengthen. China may be able to fill some of the void left by Russian overpromise or future unpopularity, as per the example of the Belene facility, instances which Russia will likely encourage in order to prevent Western involvement. However, even these such investments are unlikely to yield any sway over the Western preference although China may look to grow pro-Chinese sentiments at the local level such to maintain a foothold. As such, China's already limited influence is likely to decrease further. Its long-term ability to promote either economic or political stability looks increasingly limited as shown by the subthreshold aggression in the cessation of gas supply. Further, Bulgaria's membership to NATO, over China's tempering of Western dominance will likely act as the greater deterrent to Russian aggression.

Section 3

Conclusion

In conclusion, the BSR has become an important region for China, for which the discussion of whether the impact of its influence can promote stability is complex. Plagued by an interwoven fabric of conflict-ridden history and a globally strategic geography, the BSR is a uniquely unstable region that has evolved into an environment of renewed great power competition between Russia, China, and the West.

Russia remains the greatest source of instability, evidenced by attacks in the cognitive, virtual and physical domains of the targeted states. The concept of Western encirclement entrenched in Russian strategic culture, and the perception of an existential threat through NATO expansionism is likely to continue to provoke Russian aggression; the BSR is likely to remain unstable.

In the short-medium term, China, through the 17+1 construct and the BRI, is likely to continue its expansion in the BSR, under the premise of economic growth and increased access to European markets; strengthening China's influence. Whether this influence allows China to promote stability in the BSR will likely be decided by its ability to pursue its national interests whilst navigating its geopolitical engagements with Russia, the West and the BSR states themselves. China's relationship with Russia has strengthened since the collapse of the Soviet Union to the extent that the Sino-Russian rhetoric suggests their allegiance has no limits, although this narrative may be tested within the BSR. Russia, the junior partner, may find the asymmetry of power difficult in a region that historically has socio-political allegiance with Moscow. However, as Russia struggles with a declining economy, exacerbated by imposed economic sanctions since the Ukraine invasion, it will have to accept China's expansion into its perceived territory in order that it can assure its own financial support. The war in Ukraine has ultimately made China, Russia's lifeline. For the BSR specifically, this has accelerated China's role as the mediator between Russia and the BSR states and thus the influence of its asymmetrical power advantage has increased stability in the BSR by curtailing Russian aggression. China has

a difficult game to play to ensure this is sustainable. In not openly condemning the invasion, it has proven to Russia the credibility of the no limits statement. China could therefore expect to continue its economic growth in the BSR without fear of Russian reprisal with the hope of assuring future access to military technology and the Arctic. Further, China's general silence also suggests it is trying to avoid Western backlash. The preservation of both these relationships should help assure its influence in the BSR and thus its ability to promote stability.

For the BSR states considered in this paper (outside of Russia), Ukraine, Georgia and Bulgaria have all increased their cooperation with China, largely through economic investments in logistics and transport infrastructure. Increased economic investment has had a threefold stabilising effect in all three countries; increased economic stability, provided alternative avenues to Russian investment, and stimulated investment from the West. All of which reduces the dependency on Russia which reduces Russian influence. Further, buoyed by a nervousness of Chinese investment, increased Western investment has by proxy assured access to Western security. For each state however, the sustainability of this stabilising nature is more difficult to ascertain.

For Ukraine, whilst the severity of the West vs Russia conflict may overshadow any ability for China to maintain direct influence, China's decision making is likely to prove deterministic for regional stability; critically whether it prioritises economic growth or acts to assure geopolitical dominance. If it opts for the former, it may withdraw from Ukraine in pursuit of more settled investment environments which may prove destabilising as it removes any ability to temper Russian aggression and possibly signals to Russia its indifference to the war. However, if China maintains its commitment to Ukraine investment, this may stoke Western perceptions of the true intent of the BRI aggravating Western-China tensions. Alternatively, if China maintains its investment and disseminates a mediator, reconstructionist narrative, it may continue to offer stability. Irrespective, Ukraine is unlikely to simply observe. If China continues to support Russia, Ukraine may find future Chinese interaction unpalatable, potentially reject their continued investment, thereby reducing China's influence and thus its ability to promote stability.

For Georgia, the future looks more settled. The Georgian strategy of using its relationship with China to boost Georgia's strategic significance with Washington has resulted in a stable win-win environment. Though the threat of Russian aggression continues in the occupied territories, the coexistence of Chinese and US investment looks resilient enough to repel any escalation. Further, even China's exploitation of investment gaps caused by Russian over-promise, resulted in a negligible Russian reaction, suggesting that China will be able to operate with impunity in Georgia for the foreseeable future and thus assure sustainable stability. China will have to be careful to avoid US misperception of geopolitical dominance to prevent US-China tensions, although the likelihood of a full-scale conflict on these grounds is small.

Finally, for Bulgaria, China remains an inconsequential actor. Since entering NATO (2004) and the EU (2007), Bulgaria has affirmed its Western allegiance, and thus China has had difficulty in

cultivating influence. Although China's investment is increasing, its ability to promote stability is limited, highlighted by China's inability to prevent the recent cessation of Russian gas supply. The Ukraine invasion will also likely force Bulgaria to deepen its Western ties to assure its security, further reducing the ability for China to promote stability. China may continue to exploit Russian unpopularity, as per its investment in the Belene nuclear facility, but this is unlikely to challenge Western dominance which will continue to provide economic and security stability beyond anything China can offer.

Overall, whether the impact of China's influence can promote stability in the BSR in the long-term is complex. In terms of its economic influence; offering alternatives to Russian investment, stimulating domestic growth, and drawing continued Western investment into the BSR all provide economic stability, which by proxy act as a deterrent against Russian aggression owing to Russian dependencies on China and the need for Russia to maintain this relationship. However, the war in Ukraine is likely to irrevocably change the geopolitics of the region within which China will need to carefully navigate the changing dynamics in order to retain its influence and thereby its ability to promote stability. China likely has three courses of action to assure this influence; support Russia, support the West or remain neutral. If China supports Russia under the no limits narrative, it will jeopardize its relationship with the West and will further force BSR states to turn West. It therefore loses influence in the BSR, and the region becomes increasingly unstable becoming a theatre for a new Cold War. If China supports the West, the BSR is likely to become more stable as China and the US offer a united front against Russia. Finally, and potentially the most likely, China will remain neutral, aiming to balance its position as a mediator showing sufficient support to Russia to future proof its long-term objectives, but with enough support for the West in order to continue to expand in the BSR and Europe. What is likely however, is that irrespective of China's overall grand strategy, for which the academic discussion remains inconclusive, China is likely to be constrained to economic influence until it can also compete militarily. Although this economic influence gives China disproportionate geopolitical influence as it nears superpower status, the BSR, underpinned by Western liberalism ideology, will likely continue to seek security from the West as security assurance over economic influence is likely to be the stronger deterrent against Russian aggression. Thus, the stabilising nature of China, in the long-term may be limited as it lacks the means to provide stability through security. Interestingly, this may be China's preferred outcome. The war may have enabled Jinping to pursue his preferred strategy; exploiting the Russian investment void without the burden of security responsibility allowing it to play the quaint pacifist until such time that it declares otherwise.

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