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# CHINA HORIZONS

DEALING WITH A RESURGENT CHINA

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## China's Influence at the United Nations: Words and Deeds

*Alicia García-Herrero, Théo Storella  
& Pauline Weil*

Bruegel



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# Abstract

We investigate China's influence in the United Nations by focusing on the promotion of its narratives (words) and its voting behaviour (deeds). For the former, we assess the extent to which China's global initiatives have become embedded in UN discourse compared to Western ones. For the latter, we assess the degree to which countries, regions and voting coalitions align their UN General Assembly votes with China compared to the US. When it comes to words, China's global initiatives are sometimes louder than the West's. More specifically, the Belt and Road Initiative has had a much larger impact on UN discourse than any Western initiative. Other Chinese global initiatives do not clearly stand out from those of the West, with the Global Compact for Migration mentioned more frequently at the UN than any Chinese initiative other than the BRI. We also find that Chinese initiatives are more self-referential. Thematically, both Chinese and Western initiatives are very focused on security as well as aid and human rights. Moving to voting patterns, countries' income levels are a key determinant of alignment in voting. Poorer countries are much more aligned with China than with the US. North America and the European Union, in that order, are generally more aligned with the US than with China and these trends are much more stable than one could expect given China's growing economic influence.

## Key findings

- Focusing on narratives (words) first, the Belt and Road Initiative has had a much greater impact on UN discourse than any Western or any other Chinese global initiative and certainly much more than the EU's counteroffer – the Global Gateway. Secondly, Chinese global initiatives are more self-referential than those of the West and mention the US more often than partners in emerging economies. Western initiatives, instead, tend to mention countries targeted by their initiatives more frequently. Finally, we also find that security is the most relevant theme in China's global initiatives.
- Moving to voting patterns (deeds), we find that countries are generally more aligned with China than the US when voting at the UN, all the more so for low-income countries with Russia as a case of very close alignment with China. EU member states, in turn, tend to be slightly more aligned with the US, and much so for votes that are important for the US.
- Very importantly, these general trends have hardly changed since the beginning of our sample in 2000. This is quite surprising if one considers China's growing economic power globally and the flurry of global initiatives that China has pushed into UN discourse.
- All in all, western narratives are not compelling and popular enough in the community of nations, but neither are all Chinese global narratives, except for the Belt and Road. The limited impact of the Global Gateway is particularly poignant, which should make responsible EU officials reflect on how to better promote this initiative.
- Second, the Global South has long been aligned with China when voting at the General Assembly, but the EU has not as much. This is true for UN voting related to Russia's aggression of Ukraine but much less so for the Israel-Hamas war.

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# 1. Introduction

Understanding China's influence in the UN is essential for comprehending contemporary international relations, governance and the future of global cooperation. As one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, China plays a crucial role in shaping international laws, resolutions and responses to global conflicts. Its stance on various issues can significantly affect global governance. China is already the second-largest economy in the world, which also means that it can increasingly leverage its financial resources to expand its influence. Its investments in developing countries through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative can potentially sway votes and shape policy discussions. China's participation in UN agencies and forums also allows it to influence global norms and standards in areas including trade, technology and environmental policy. Finally, as issues including climate change, global public health and cybersecurity require coordinated international responses, China's influence in the UN is critical in shaping how the world will address these challenges.

This paper focuses on two relevant areas of potential influence. First, we investigate how terminology from Chinese global narratives is entering the UN discourse – how China's 'words' have become embedded at the UN. Second, we assess the extent to which countries tend to vote similarly to China – how China's 'deeds' align with other countries' votes – particularly on the issues of Russian aggressions on Ukraine and Israel military actions.

Starting with China's words, the country has launched a flurry of global initiatives over the past five years. Collectively, they represent a critical shift in Chinese foreign policy from restraint to assertiveness. These initiatives seek to promote new approaches to economic development, international trade, conflict mediation and good governance. Some countries welcome the changes while others are concerned that they may undermine the rules-based international order. We thus investigate the extent to which Chinese narratives of global governance have become more embedded in the UN. These initiatives, along with their Western counterparts, are listed in Annex 1.

Voting patterns in the UN have been subject to substantial analysis, but there has yet to be an up-to-date investigation of whether countries, regions and UN voting coalitions have voted more similarly to China than to the United States, particularly during global crises including Russian aggression and the Israel-Hamas War. We address this literature gap by calculating each country's degree of alignment with China and the US and comparing them over time, particularly in the context of Russian aggression and the Israel-Hamas War.

This paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews literature covering China's influence in the UN. In section 3, we describe the methodology, data and results of our global initiatives analysis. Section 4 follows a similar structure, focusing on our UN voting records analysis. Finally, policy recommendations are presented in section 6.

## 2. Literature review

While several studies have investigated China's growing influence at the UN, most have focused on staffing of executive-level UN positions, and contributions to UN peacekeeping forces (Fung and Lam, 2022; Hyde, 2022; Lu, 2024; Zhang and Jing, 2024). A substantial literature gap remains over the use of narratives to permeate UN discourse and alignment with China in voting patterns of countries, regions and voting coalitions.

The UN is particularly well-suited to the development of voting coalitions given that, aside from the UN Security Council, each country only contributes one vote to a proposed motion regardless of its economic size or military strength. Sokolova (2019) noted how UN coalitions are often formed along axes of commerce. Following the implementation of regional free trade agreements (FTA), signatories tend to converge in voting patterns at the UN, regardless of whether the FTA has a substantial economic impact on trade. In the same vein, Dreher et al (2008) argued that trade ties influence UN voting more broadly as countries fear antagonising their trade partners and losing a degree of market access as a result.

Dreher et al (2008) also found that countries form coalitions along political lines, drawing on their identities as members of political groups to more easily affiliate themselves with likeminded regimes. More specifically, they found that democracies tend to vote more similarly to G7 countries, while authoritarian regimes vote less so (Dreher et al, 2008). According to their findings, countries with stronger economies and larger militaries vote less similarly to the G7, suggesting that larger economies provide more voting agency at the UN (Dreher et al, 2008). As one of the world's top trading nations, China holds a strong position in forming coalitions among nations at the UN, while it has also fashioned itself as a prominent member of the Global South and ally to nations frustrated by browbeating by Western democracies.

A prominent manifestation of these identity-based voting coalitions is the Group of 77 – a coalition of countries from the Global South that promote each other's economic interests by mostly voting together at the UN. Created in the mid-1960s, the group has grown to now include 133 countries. It has been pivotal in the UN and continues to advocate for the economic interests of developing countries (Asadi, 2008). China is not an official member but supports the G77 politically and financially and takes part in the summits, allowing it to maintain its independence and exercise influence. A study by Takahashi (2021) of Chinese alignment with the G77 identified certain areas of conflict between the two. He suggested that China's relationship with the G77 is not without complexities that require careful management to maintain China's alignment with the Global South while advocating for its unique national interests.

China is perceived as increasingly influential given the rise its rising weight in the UN's budget. It is increasing mechanically with Chinese growth as mandatory contributions are calculated based on a complex formula that takes into account population and GDP. From previously providing only a 2 percent mandatory share of the UN's total budget during the early 2000s, China now contributes more than a 15 percent mandatory share of the UN's budget, second

only to the 22 percent US contribution (Lu, 2024; Zhang and Jing, 2024). China aims to position itself as a 'responsible great power' by being a reliable contributor, with current and on-time payments (Zhang and Jing 2024), a strategy that benefits from the US concurrently being an increasingly unreliable contributor (Hyde, 2022). Nonetheless, the US remains by far the largest contributor to the UN, including through its voluntary contributions, which China provides much less (Zhang and Jing, 2024).

China has also solidified its presence in the UN by holding campaigns to have Chinese representatives nominated to key UN offices. Chinese citizens have led the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs since 2007, the World Health Organization from 2006 to 2017, and the Food and Agriculture Organization since 2019 (Fung and Lam, 2022). While not all such Chinese campaigns have succeeded, these efforts are a proactive step in Chinese foreign policy, allowing it to steer the UN from within through influence over agenda setting for UN agencies and report drafting. Another side of China's influence campaigns is its role in UN peacekeeping missions. China has consistently increased the number of troops, police and equipment it provides to the UN, making it the tenth most significant contributor to UN peacekeeping missions in 2020 (Gowan, 2020).

Finally, several studies have investigated critical UN votes, such as those on Russia's war in Ukraine, to understand whether countries followed China's lead in the UN when rejecting, abstaining or absenting themselves from votes unfavourable to Russia. On Ukraine-related resolutions, Amighini and García-Herrero (2023) found that trade with Russia was more relevant in explaining a country's votes on the Russo-Ukrainian War than trade with China. However, the same study also found empirical evidence that membership of China's Belt and Road Initiative influenced decisions by countries to take neutral positions in votes related to Russia's invasion.

In sum, previous studies have investigated the broad nature of UN coalitions and certain dimensions of China's strategy to build influence at the UN through diverse means. However, they have yet to investigate the degree to which Chinese narratives of global governance have permeated the UN, and the degree to which countries and regions across the world vote in alignment with China.

This paper investigates China's influence in the UN by focusing on the promotion of its initiatives (words) and its votes (deeds). We first assess the degree to which China's global initiatives have entered UN discourse compared to Western initiatives by analysing the frequency and context of their use in through thousands of UN documents. Second, we investigate the degree to which countries follow China's voting patterns compared to those of the US. More specifically, we take all votes at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and calculate an index of voting alignment with China and compare it with the same voting alignment with the US.

## 3. Words

### 3.1 Chinese vs. Western narratives

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has used global narratives related to development, cooperation and security for decades, but their use has accelerated under President Xi. The best-known concept is that of the Belt and Road Initiative, which fused several earlier developments in Chinese foreign policy. State-owned enterprises were first encouraged to invest abroad under China's 1999 'Going Out Strategy'. Then, in a drive for 'Mutual Connectivity', Chinese diplomats advocated for infrastructure projects under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the ASEAN plus three (APT), beginning in 2008. As a result of China's large investment package in 2010 to mitigate the impacts of the global financial crisis, productive overcapacity became one of China's key economic problems in 2010, contributing to President Xi Jinping's launch of the Silk Road Economic Belt programme in 2013. The programme quickly became known as One Belt One Road (一带一路) and was given a new English name in 2015: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Trump's trade war, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, worsened the world's sentiment towards the BRI (García-Herrero, 2024) but the initiative was still pushed intensively by President Xi in many of his speeches, as part of the promotion of a flurry of global initiatives since 2021, most notably the 'Community of Shared Future for Mankind' (人类命运共同体) which was popularised by President Xi at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2017 and inserted into several UN General Assembly resolutions since then. The initiative initially dates to 2007 when President Hu Jintao launched it domestically, and later became part of the national and CCP constitutions. Xi's overseas promotion of this concept characterised it as an umbrella for China's international relations, emphasising 'win-win outcomes' and the development of a multipolar world.

The Global Development Initiative (全球发展倡议) was introduced by Xi Jinping at the UN General Assembly in 2021 as a China-led initiative to advance the UN 2030 agenda on Sustainable Development Goals. It gained notoriety for advocating 'development as a human right'. A third narrative, the Global Security Initiative (全球安全倡议) was launched by President Xi in April 2022 just after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, focusing on state sovereignty, creating a balanced security architecture and diminishing the role of security blocs to guarantee global collective security. Finally, the Global Civilization Initiative (全球文明倡议) was launched by President Xi Jinping in 2023 during a CCP virtual conference attended by world leaders, emphasising respect for cultural and governmental diversity among nations, promoting people-to-people exchanges as a cornerstone of global affairs.

Regarding Western narratives, this paper initially assessed a list of over twenty Western global initiatives, narrowing the scope to six of the most popular, well-funded, and illustrative initiatives. First, the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) was one of the West's most

ambitious and impactful global initiatives, promoting a narrative of collective public health security and the US's leading role in that regard. Launched by President George W. Bush in 2003, PEPFAR has invested more than \$100 billion to fight HIV across the world, particularly in Southern Africa. Its efforts are global, but with a focus on the epicentre of Africa's HIV epidemic, where needs are most acute.

Western narratives on collective security have also developed through several global initiatives, particularly EU Training Missions and the Global Counterterrorism Forum. Launched in 2010, EU Training Missions were held in several parts of Africa where political instability and violent extremism have had devastating consequences. Their focus has mostly been military, by training and equipping several African governments to protect civilians and prevent extremist forces from gaining footholds in their states. The Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), on the other hand, prioritises non-military interventions to target the root of extremist recruitment among vulnerable populations. Launched in 2011 by representatives of the US and Turkey, it was one of the first international efforts to study and promote policy solutions combatting violent extremism across the world. The platform still contributes substantively to counterterrorism efforts today.

On immigration, Switzerland and Mexico launched the Global Compact for Migration in 2016, which Germany was instrumental in promoting to address the impacts of the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe. The initiative developed a narrative of collective responsibility in caring for refugees and remains critical in addressing the global refugee crises. In response to certain aspects of globalisation including migration, the Alliance for Multilateralism was launched in 2019 by Germany and France to counter a wave of European isolationism. Right-wing governments had been elected across several European countries, retreating from European integration.

Finally, the EU launched the Global Gateway in 2021 with the objective of investing €300 billion from 2021 to 2027 for sustainable and value-driven investments in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Perceived broadly as a European response to China's BRI, it focuses on catalysing green and digital transitions among developing countries.

These two sets of narratives frequently concern the same issues and sometimes even through similar means. However, their underlying values and judgments about the current world order differ substantially. We seek to understand which sets of initiatives, along with the global narratives underpinning them, have become more embedded in UN discourse, and which are most influential in UN voting.

## 3.2 Methodology and data

To analyse the propagation of Chinese initiatives and compare them with Western ones, we first identified the global initiatives from China and the West which most directly articulated a novel approach to global public policy. Most importantly, initiatives were selected based on the degree to which they advanced global approaches to the UN's central mandate on collective security, global governance, humanitarianism and economic development. Then, documentary data was collected from the United Nations Digital Library, a searchable

repository of over 1.4 million documents generated by the UN General Assembly and its affiliated agencies.

All selected initiatives were mentioned in over 2,500 documents indexed in the UN Digital Library. The documents were composed mostly of reports and meeting records from the UN General Assembly, UN Human Rights bodies, the UN Department Economic and Social Affairs and the UN Secretariat.

Documents mentioning each initiative at any point in their text were first scraped with Python's Selenium package to automate mouse movements in a browser and paginate through results, downloading each document as a PDF. Then, each document was transcribed into a processable format using the Tesseract Optical Character Recognition function from Python, which reads documents as photos to transcribe them more accurately, including each document's unique formatting.

After transcription, each file was analysed using Python's dictionaries and regex functions from the Pandas library to identify the dates of each document, where each initiative was mentioned in a document and, most critically, which countries were mentioned in proximity to the initiative. The final step dissected each document into its component paragraphs, and searched for mentions of initiatives and countries within each paragraph to later conduct national and regional analyses of countries linked syntactically to each global initiative.

It is important to note that, given the diversity of document types used across the data and the lack of a sufficiently detailed classification system across the database, documents could not be classified by hierarchies of importance – eg differentiating draft resolutions from final ones – or to disaggregate data by the creators and discussants of initiatives.

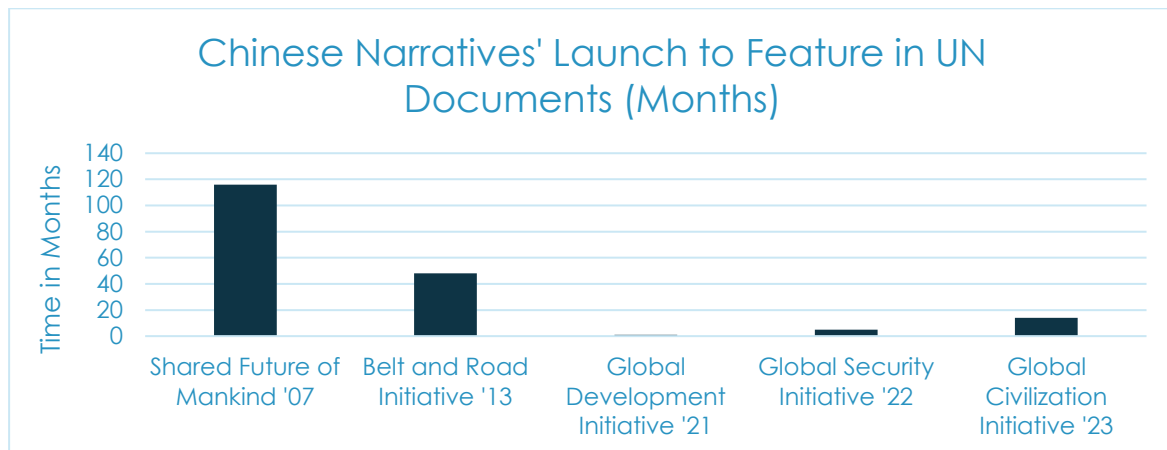
Finally, Facebook AI's Bidirectional and Auto-Regressive Transformers large-language model (LLM) was used to broadly classify the topics of each document included in our analysis under a series of labels. The model identified words affiliated with a list of given topics (security, aid, human rights, trade, religion, East-West relations, health, migration, education and infrastructure) to determine which topic is closest associated with the entire document's lexicon. This process was key to conducting a thematic analysis of the documents mentioning each global initiative.

## 3.3 Results

### Chinese global initiatives

We first investigate Chinese global initiatives and how they have evolved over time, finding that such initiatives used to remain in China's domestic public discourse for much longer before jumping to the international arena, and particularly the UN. From waiting several years to announce the Community of Common Destiny and the BRI at the UN, China now launches certain global initiatives directly at the UN General Assembly without first even mentioning them domestically, as was the case with the Global Development Initiative in 2021. This indicates that China is increasingly confident in promulgating global initiatives, and perhaps even that its intended audience has shifted from a domestic base to an international one (Figure 1).

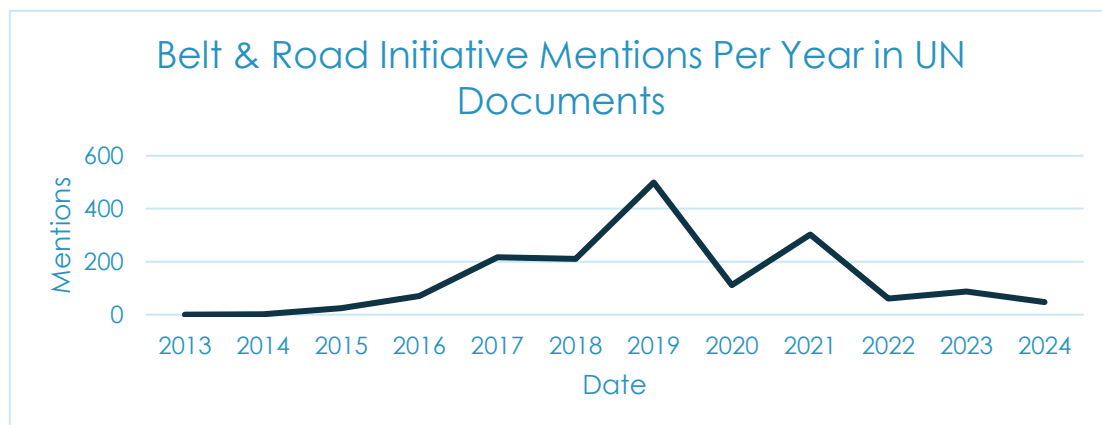
**Figure 1: Chinese narratives, time from launch to first appearance in UN documents**



Source: Bruegel.

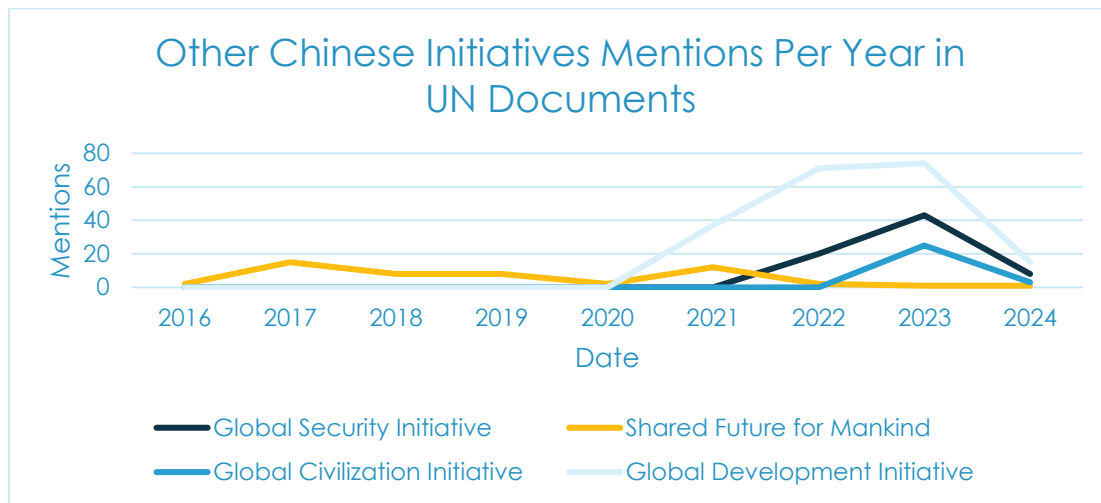
A second important issue is the hierarchy of China's global initiatives at the UN. Over time, the BRI has become China's primary and best-known global initiative, although its promulgation at the UN took several years to gain steam. It reached a peak of over 500 mentions in UN documents in 2019, the start of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequently decreased until today. None of China's other initiatives have yet gained the notoriety of the BRI. Beyond the BRI, the Global Development Initiative has been most resounding, but its shine has waned since 2023, a decrease mirrored by all other Chinese initiatives (Figures 2 and 3).

**Figure 2: Belt & Road Initiative mentions per year in UN documents**



Source: Bruegel.

**Figure 3: Other Chinese initiatives mentions per year in UN documents**

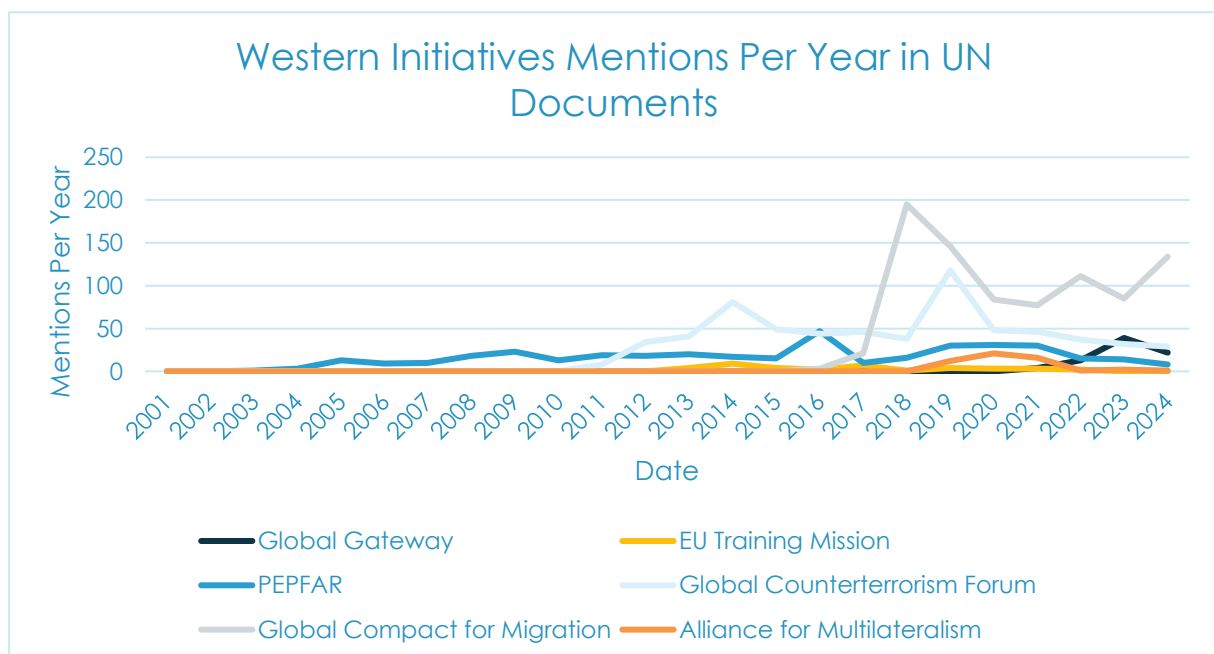


Source: Bruegel.

### Western global initiatives

Western initiatives gained some traction at the same time as the BRI but with far fewer mentions in UN documents. Among the six Western initiatives identified, the Global Compact for Migration has been the most successful in terms of UN mentions, especially during its first two years, falling to around 100 mentions per year before gaining pace again in 2024. The Global Counterterrorism Forum has been more consistently mentioned over the past twenty years, spiking in years where substantial terror attacks occurred in 2014 and 2019. Mentions of PEPFAR were also relatively constant, ranging from about 25 to 50 mentions per year in UN documents.

**Figure 4: Mentions per year in UN documents of EU and US initiatives**



Source: Bruegel.

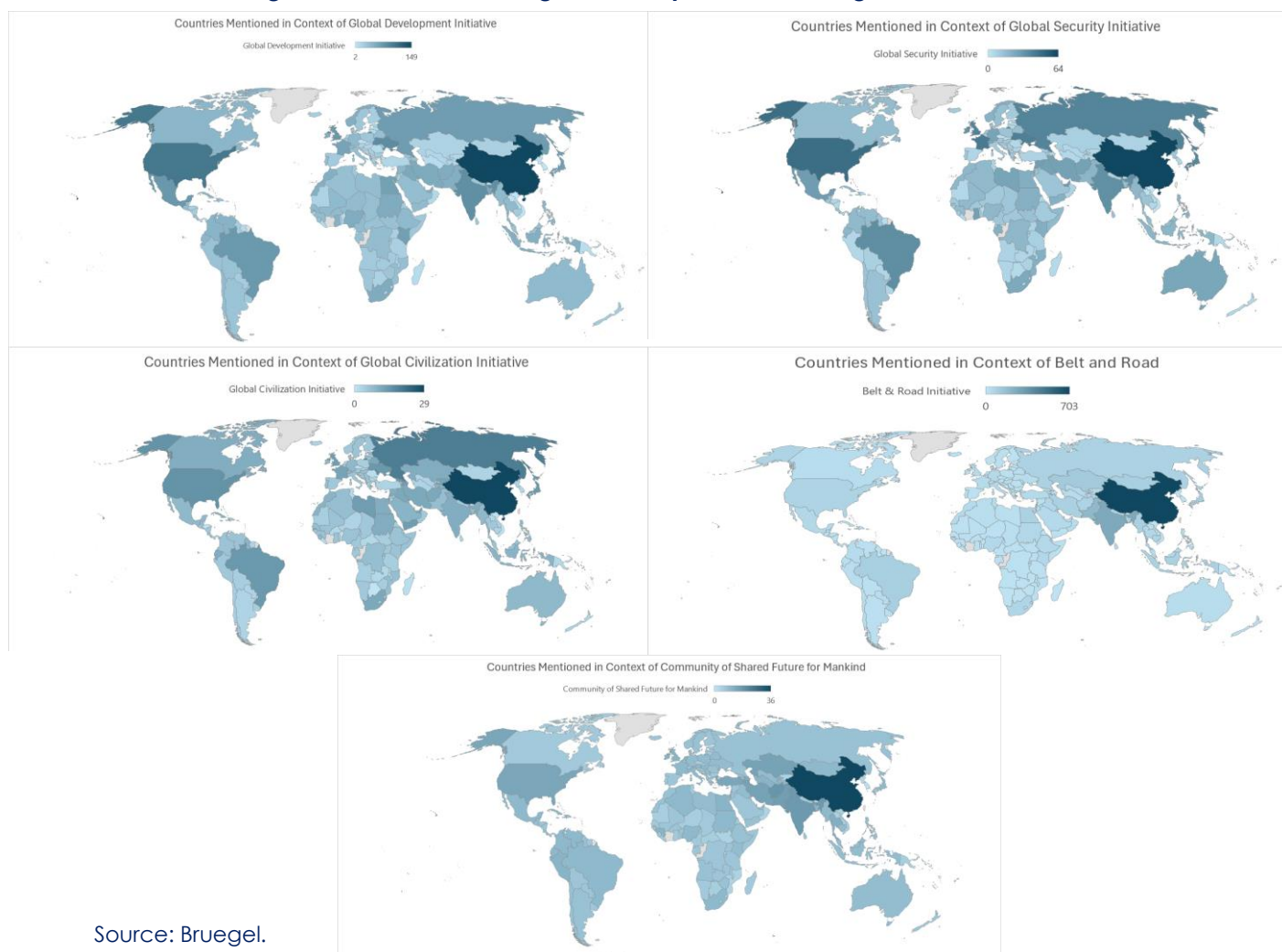
## Comparing Chinese and Western initiatives

China's least-cited initiatives are the 2007 Community of Common Destiny and the 2023 Global Civilization Initiative, while the least cited European Initiative is the Alliance for Multilateralism. In all, the BRI is by far the most relevant global initiative covered by this analysis. In terms of citations in UN documents, it has appeared nearly 1,000 times since its inception. Furthermore, despite its number of yearly mentions decreasing since 2022, the BRI remains the most cited Chinese initiative today.

All projects exhibit spikes of engagement in years that can be broadly correlated with their focus areas, including mentions of the Global Security Initiative spiking in 2022 after the invasion of Ukraine, and the Global Compact for Migration peaking in 2017 just after the European refugee crisis.

Chinese and Western global initiatives have all gained more traction in certain areas than others, reflecting the different intent and reception of each initiative. By using choropleths – graphs similar to heat maps – the number of times each country is mentioned in the context of a global initiative becomes readily apparent, enabling conclusions to be drawn on the regional impact of such initiatives.

**Figure 5: National and regional analysis of Chinese global initiatives**



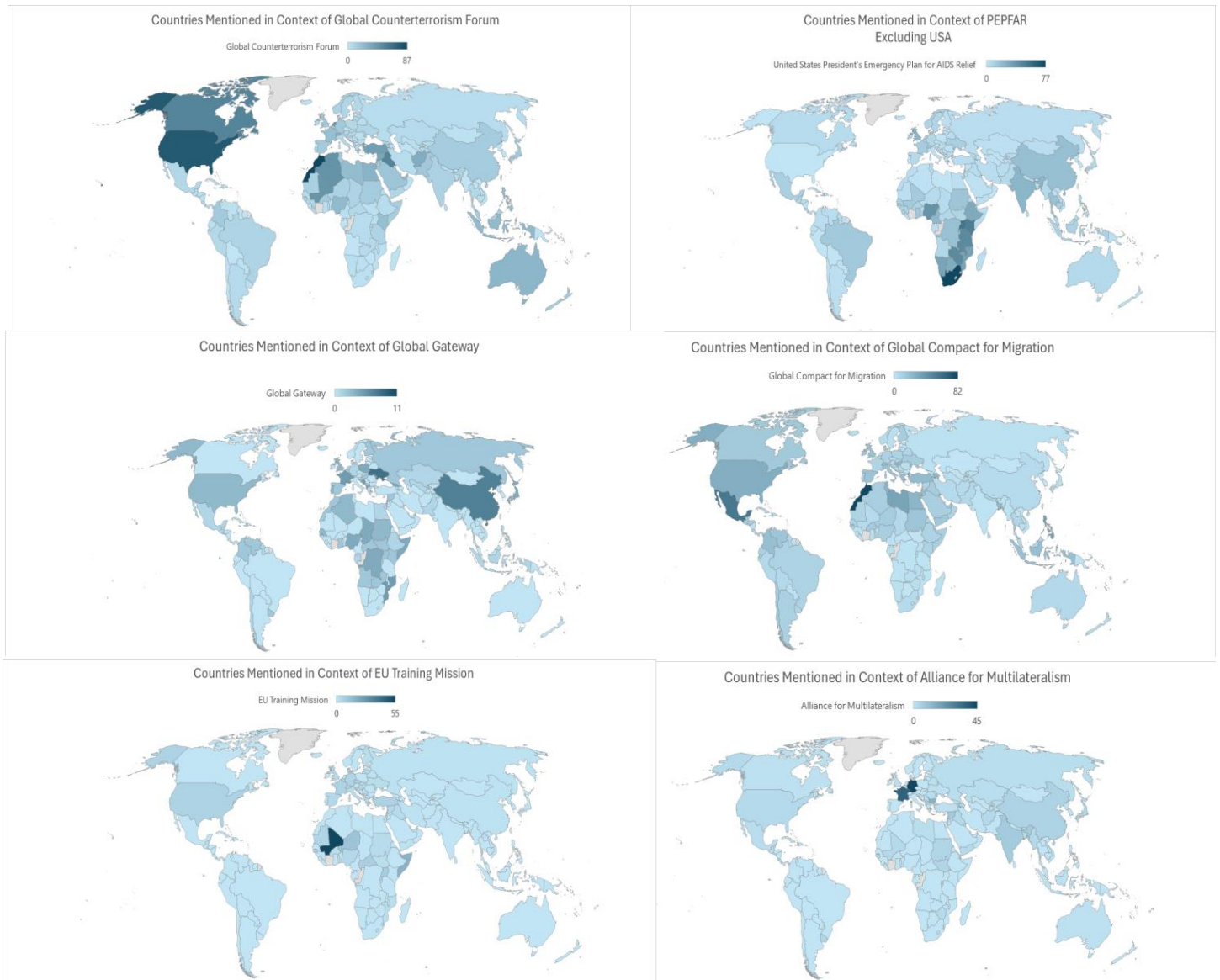
Source: Bruegel.

Among global Chinese initiatives, we find that the UN discourse surrounding each of them is overwhelmingly self-referential (Figure 5). Rather than centring partner countries in speeches, memoranda and reports, China is by far the most frequently referenced country linked to its own initiatives. We cannot conclude whether the mention of countries in proximity to global initiatives is self-referential or whether partner nations refer back to China, but these findings suggest a hub-and-spoke system of global engagement, in which China is firmly at the centre of its global initiatives, branching out to partners rather than centring them or pursuing partnerships of equal visibility. This is clearest in the context of the BRI, which, despite being mentioned more times and more internationally than any other Chinese initiative, still produces a choropleth that appears almost entirely focused on China itself.

The next most apparent trend across all Chinese global initiatives is the disproportionate number of mentions of the US. With consistently the largest delegation to the UN, the greatest share of the UN's budget, and its P-5 status at the UN Security Council, the US is frequently mentioned in proximity to Chinese global initiatives (Figure 5). However, it is important to note that we cannot conclude whether the US is mentioned in a supportive or critical context in relation to these initiatives, since documents were ill-suited to a sentiment analysis.

Finally, Figure 6 illustrates that in the UN, geographical proximity to China correlates with a greater number of citations in UN documents pertaining to China's global initiatives. Countries in China's proverbial backyard are disproportionately cited compared to countries elsewhere, though BRICS nations are a significant exception – they are mentioned consistently in proximity to new Chinese initiatives such as the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative and the Global Civilisation Initiative.

**Figure 6: National and regional analysis of Western global initiatives**



Source: Bruegel.

Western initiatives meanwhile are less international than the Chinese, focused on countries particularly relevant to each initiative's design and intent. The most widely cited Western initiatives are the Global Counterterrorism Forum and the Global Compact for Migration, but in each case, the US remains the most cited country in relation to the initiatives, illustrating its dominance in UN discourse (Figure 6). Much like China's most cited BRI, the West's most cited initiatives are ostensibly focused on security and aid. The Global Counterterrorism Forum and the Global Compact for Migration have been collectively cited over a thousand times since their inception, potentially indicating that these topics have the most appeal at the UN.

Differences between the two sets of choropleths are significant. Whereas the US was frequently mentioned in close proximity to Chinese initiatives, choropleths for Western initiatives show no sign of the reverse (Figure 6). China is largely absent from UN documents citing Western

initiatives, except in the case of the Global Gateway, possibly since this initiative is widely perceived as the EU's response to the BRI.

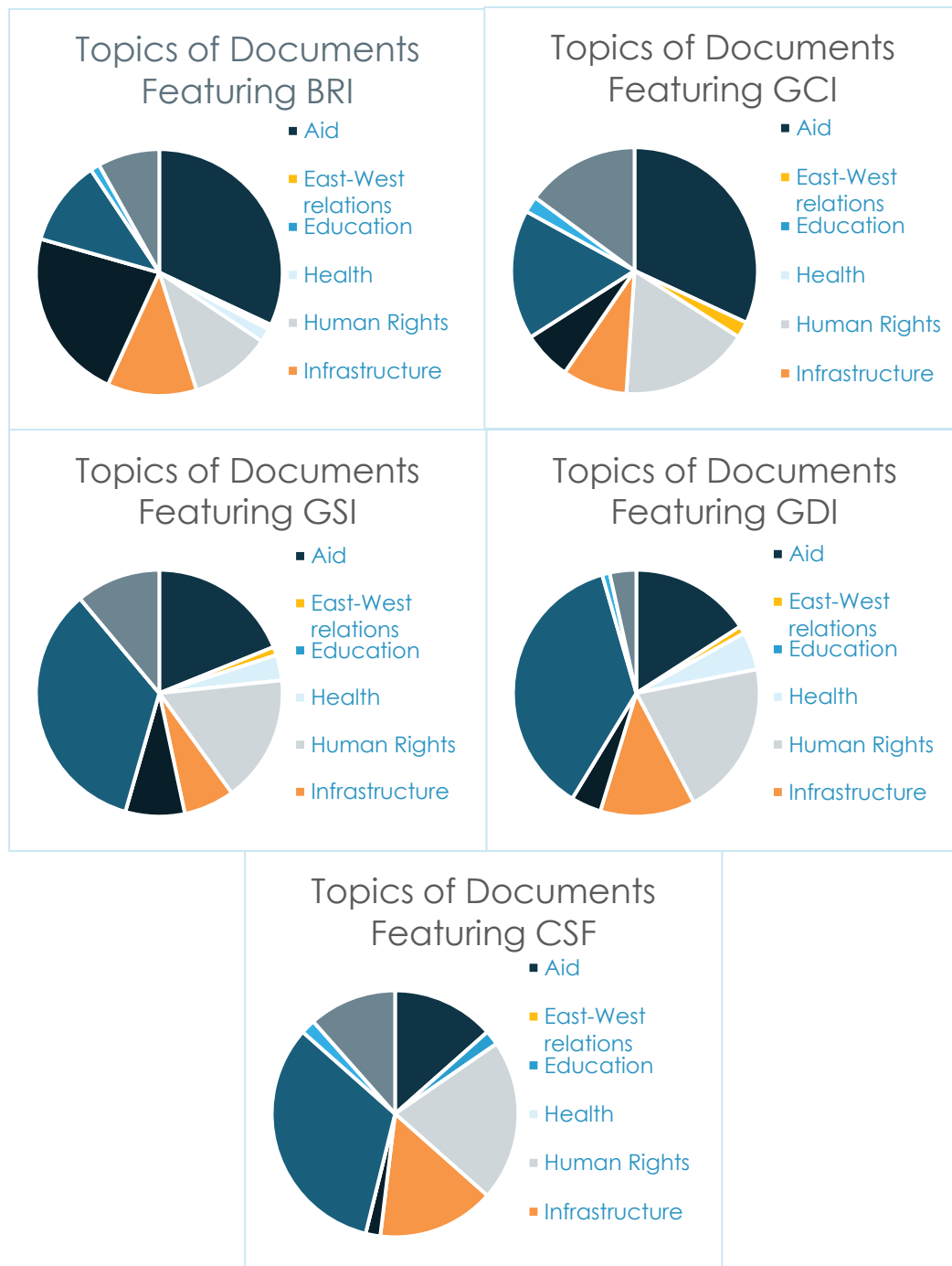
Most importantly, Western global initiatives show substantially less international uptake than Chinese initiatives. The French and German sponsored Alliance for Multilateralism is a clear example of this phenomenon. The initiative was mentioned in proximity to just the two initiators of the programme, failing to reach a broader audience – even in Europe. In the cases of the Global Compact for Migration and the EU Training Missions, countries mentioned in proximity to the initiatives were mostly dealing with high rates of migration, such as Morocco and Mexico, while for EU Training Missions the only countries mentioned in proximity to the initiatives were those where EU-sponsored security training was carried out.

An exception to this trend is PEPFAR. When mentions of the US are excluded from the choropleth, given that the programme's name is the US President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief, the countries mentioned in proximity to PEPFAR include a broad swath of sub-Saharan Africa. That region is where most cases of HIV were focused, ie where AIDS relief was needed most. Paired with our analysis of initiative mentions over time, PEPFAR appears to have the most longevity and highest degree of internationalisation amongst Western initiatives.

### **What are the key topics of different initiatives?**

The Bidirectional and Auto-Regressive Transformers LLM run on UN documents which mention Chinese and Western global initiatives reveals important insights, as illustrated in Figures 7 and 8. China's global initiatives nearly all focus substantially on security. Three-fifths of Chinese initiatives are discussed in documents mostly pertaining to security, while only two-fifths are discussed in the context of other topics, with human rights as the most relevant topic other than security (Figure 7). Beyond this, the LLM found that China's global initiatives are less distinct from one another in their usage than Western ones.

**Figure 7: Topics of documents featuring China's global initiatives**



Source: Bruegel.

Only the BRI and the Global Civilisation Initiative are discussed more in documents pertaining to aid and human rights rather than security. The Shared Future of Mankind, Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative are all discussed mostly in the context of documents about security, which is particularly surprising given the names of the first two.

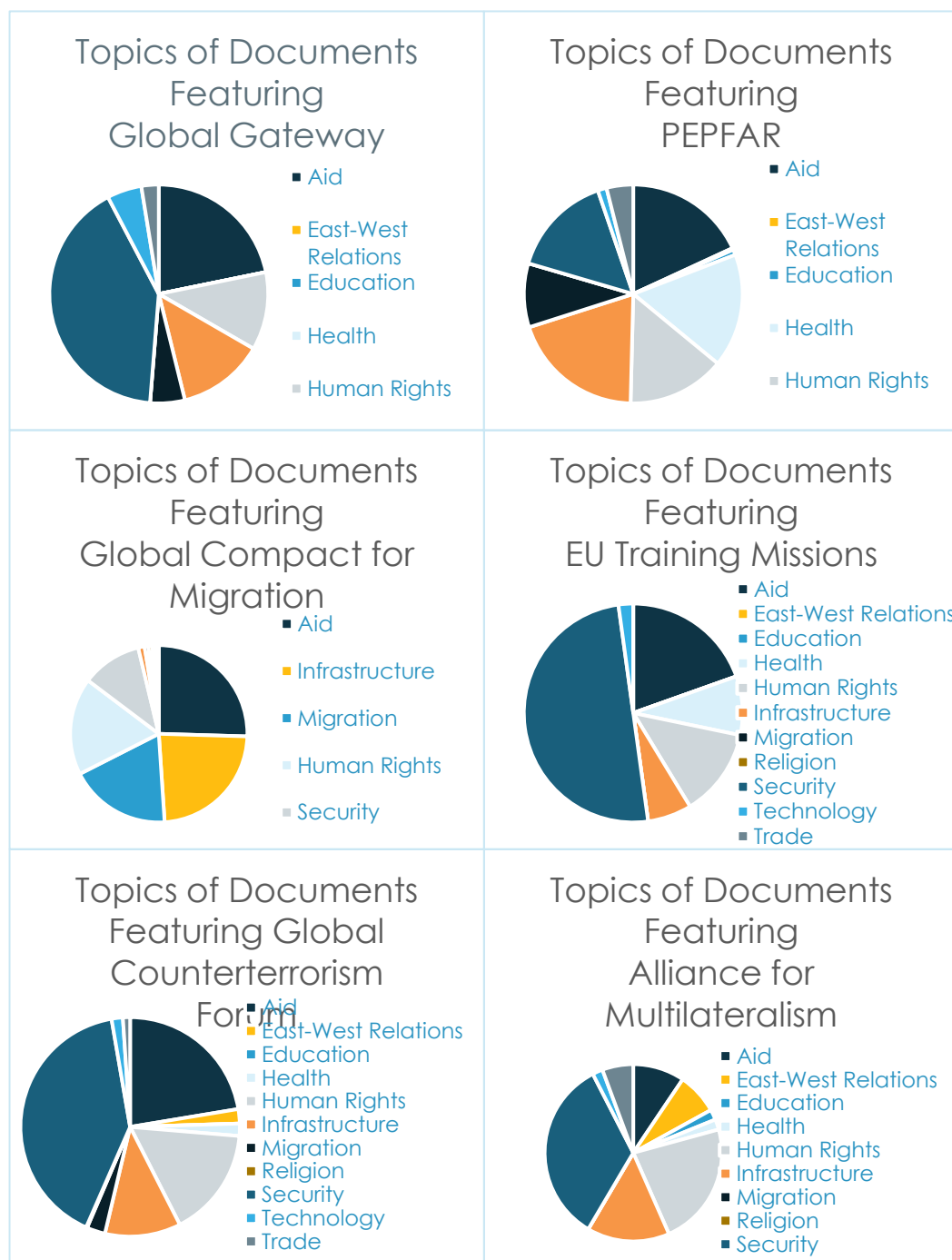
Interestingly, human rights were the second most common topic of UN documents featuring Chinese global initiatives (Figure 7). While China is frequently at odds with other members of

the UN over human rights, and especially the West, it frequently elevates issues that are central to its initiatives to the status of human rights. The clearest example of this is in the context of the Global Development Initiative, where China and others frequently assert that development is a human right, for which it advocates through the Global Development Initiative.

Documents mentioning US and EU initiatives are also chiefly about security, but frequently in less surprising ways than was the case with China's Shared Future for Mankind and Global Development Initiative. For example, the Global Counterterrorism Forum, and EU Training Missions were all chiefly designed to address security issues in the context of violent extremism; therefore, it is not strange that the focus of these initiatives is security (Figure 8). More surprisingly, the Global Gateway and Alliance for Multilateralism were all chiefly cited in documents with the main topic of security, despite their ostensible focus on development and international cooperation. The Global Gateway is a programme of sustainable value-driven investment with little focus on security issues, yet more than a third of all documents it was mentioned in pertained chiefly to security. This, again, might be related to this initiative's portrayal as the EU's response to the BRI.

Aid was the second most cited topic for documents mentioning Western initiatives, with human rights and infrastructure frequently following close behind (Figure 8). In certain cases, findings illustrated diverse components of initiatives, even when their names may superficially denote only a single topic. In particular, the Global Compact for Migration and PEPFAR were each cited in documents concerning infrastructure, aid and human rights, indicating that even initiatives focused explicitly on migration and health branch out into areas which contribute to those priorities.

Figure 8: Topics of documents featuring the West's global initiatives



Source: Bruegel.

## 4. Deeds

### 4.1 Chinese vs. US influence in UNGA voting

As the second component of this paper, our analysis of UN votes frames each country's votes in relation to how either China or US voted on the same issues. We build country, region and voting coalition profiles, measuring the degree of alignment between them and China or US voting patterns over time. Rather than measuring voting affinities towards each EU member state, this investigation analyses them as a bloc, disaggregated by European sub-regions to determine the degree of alignment among EU members on UN votes, and then collectively to measure the degree of EU alignment with Chinese and US voting patterns.

### 4.2 Methodology and data

This investigation uses a database created by Voeten et al (2009), which collected UNGA voting data and was updated as recently as 2024. The database lists General Assembly roll call votes, namely votes in which each UN member state votes. Data was then cleaned to only include votes since 1971, when China replaced Taiwan at the UN. The total number of such roll call votes are 5,200 in which countries either approved, disapproved, abstained or absented themselves.

Each voting record lists the positions taken by each member state, and these were assigned scores to rate their degree of agreement with China or the US. As illustrated by Figure 9, in a vote in which China cast a 'YES', Country X voted 'YES' as well, it would be assigned a score of 1 for that vote – perfect alignment with China's voting. If Country X voted 'NO' or was 'Absent', it would be assigned a score of 0 – perfect misalignment with China's voting. Finally, if Country X voted 'Abstain', it would receive a score of 0.5. This methodology was inspired by Griffin (2004)'s application of the Lijphart index for UN voting.

Over thousands of votes, 'Alignment Scores' for each country's degree of alignment with Chinese or US voting patterns were averaged annually. Together, these scores permitted analyses of global subregions, as well as analyses of Russia, the EU and the previously mentioned coalition of emerging and developing countries, the G77.

**Figure 9: Alignment score rating methodology**

Country X	China			
	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
Yes	1	0	0	0
No	0	1	0	0
Abstain	0,5	0,5	1	0,5
Absent	0	0	0	1

Source: Bruegel.

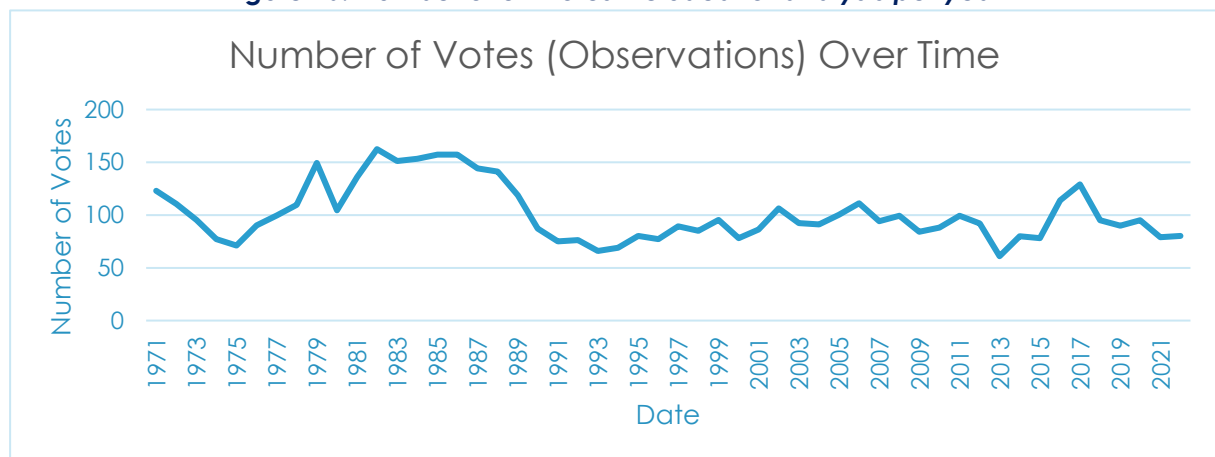
Beyond national, regional and coalition analyses, voting records presented an opportunity to disaggregate votes depending on other parameters. China and the US voted differently in 84.7 percent of all votes at the UN – 4,428 votes out of 5,227 votes – permitting an analysis of how countries, regions and voting coalitions responded to those differing circumstances. Also, the US Department of State published a list of UN votes it considered particularly important from 1983 to 2017, defined as “votes on issues which directly affected important US interests and on which the US lobbied extensively” (US Department of State, 2017). This subset enabled an analysis of how countries and regions voted on issues of significance to the US. Finally, we carried out a case study analysis of votes pertaining to Russia's invasion of Ukraine beginning in February 2022, and the Israel-Hamas War.

Together, this methodology yielded unprecedented insights into voting patterns at the UN, particularly by analysing votes as degrees of alignment with China and the US.

### 4.3 Results

As described in the methodology section, ‘Alignment Scores’ were calculated to measure the degree to which a country voted in the same way as China or as the US, revealing trends across time and regions. Figure 10 illustrates the number of votes at the General Assembly recorded in the database of Voeten et al (2009). We focus on a narrow period, namely votes cast since 2000, just before China entered the World Trade Organisation (WTO), capturing a timeframe in which China moved towards full engagement with UN institutions. The following sections compare the alignment of scores with China and the US across regions, with special attention paid to the EU, the Global South and finally resolutions pertaining to Ukraine and Gaza.

**Figure 10: Number of UN votes included for analysis per year**



Source: Bruegel.

#### **Chinese and US voting behaviour at the UN have always been very different**

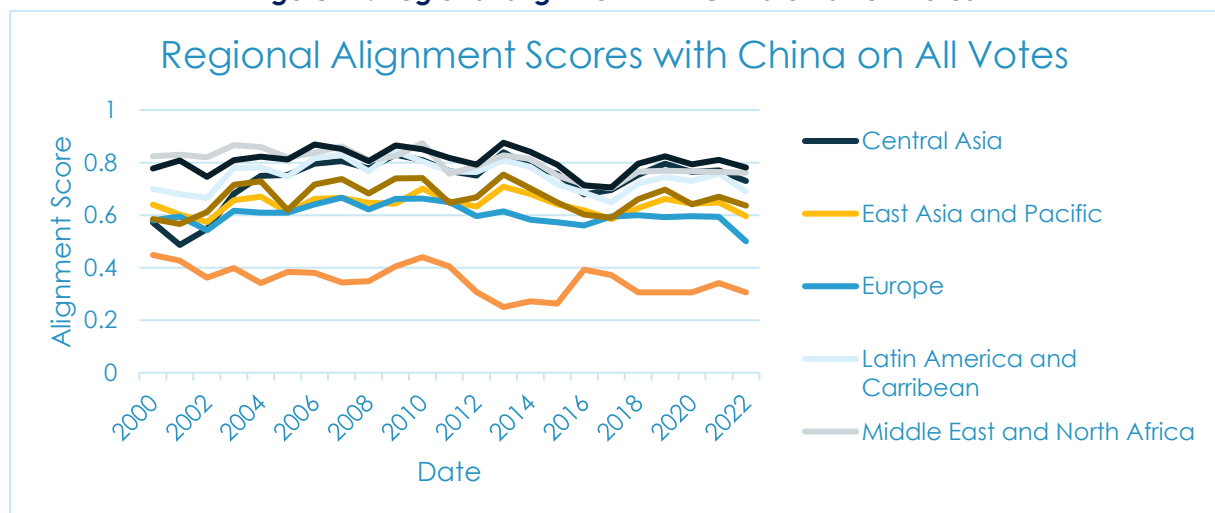
One might have expected Chinese and US voting patterns to converge during times of engagement and diverge in conflict, but that's hardly the case. China and the US voted differently in 84.7 percent of all votes at the UN. Among regions of the world, overall alignment scores with China were higher than they were for the US. No matter the region, countries across the globe tended to vote more closely in alignment with China than the US, with overall China-alignment scores ranging from 0.6 to 0.8, while US-alignment scores ranged from 0.5 to just

under 0.2 (Figure 11). Most regions are quite close in terms of their high China-alignment scores, with the EU exhibiting less alignment with China compared to other regions, and North America being by far the least close.

### Country and regional voting alignment, China vs. US

Overall affinity scores to China were higher than they were for the US through the period covered. No matter the region, countries across the globe tended to vote more closely in alignment with China than the US, with overall affinity scores to China ranging from 0.6 to 0.8, while affinity scores to the US ranged from 0.5 to just under 0.2 (Figure 10). Most regions are quite close in terms of their high affinity score to China, with the EU exhibiting less affinity to China compared to other regions and North America (Canada and Mexico) being by far the least close.

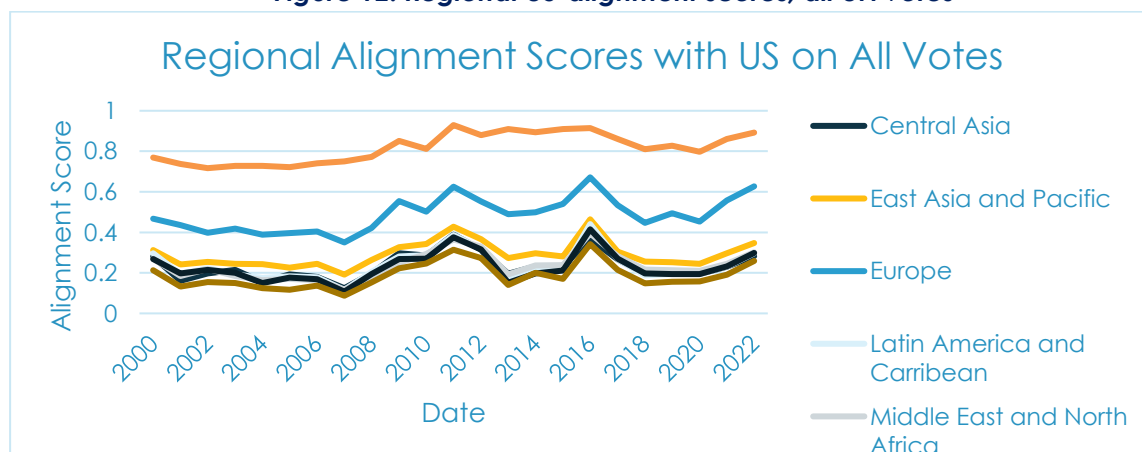
**Figure 11: Regional alignment with China on all UN votes**



Source: Bruegel.

The region with the highest alignment with US voting patterns, other than North America itself, is Europe, with alignment scores that range from 0.4 to 0.55. All other regions exhibit much less alignment with US voting patterns (Figure 12).

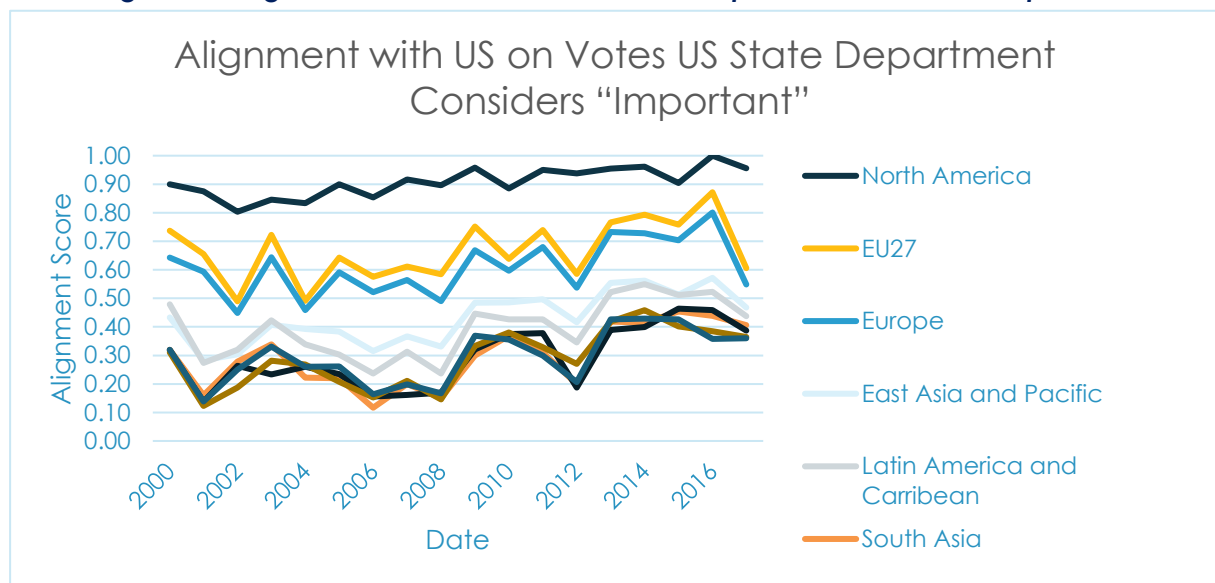
**Figure 12: Regional US-alignment scores, all UN votes**



Source: Bruegel.

Regional affinities to Chinese voting patterns were quite high, but for most votes, issues may not have been controversial. To sample controversial votes, we narrowed our analysis down to a subset of votes the US denoted as “issues which directly affect important US interests and on which the US lobbied extensively” (US State Department, 2017). In such cases, Europe’s alignment with US voting patterns is more marked, ranging from a low of just below 0.5 in 2002 and 2004 to a peak of over 0.8 in 2016 (Figure 13). However, after President Trump assumed office in 2017, a sharp drop occurred to 0.25 points. Interestingly, Central Asia’s alignment with the US in important votes is high and generally increasing, with a small correction in 2022. The rest of the world kept relatively low alignment scores with the US, even for important votes<sup>1</sup>.

**Figure 13: Alignment with US on votes US State Department considers ‘important’**



Source: Bruegel.

It is important to note that the closer alignment with Chinese voting patterns exhibited by most countries and certainly the Global South is not a new trend. In fact, this trend pre-dates the launch of China’s global initiatives and has not evidently increased since their inception. From the earliest Chinese initiative in 2007 to today, regional alignment scores with Chinese voting patterns have been relatively constant, suggesting that its initiatives have not had a substantial impact in mobilising countries to vote alongside it on UN motions. Admittedly, votes aligned with China have dropped from their peak 2013, but only slightly, and they display a resurging trend in 2021-2022. This paper does not analyse the reasons for closer alignment with China than the US, but it might be the UN’s ‘one country – one vote’ principle, since emerging and developing economies outnumber developed countries and their votes broadly align.

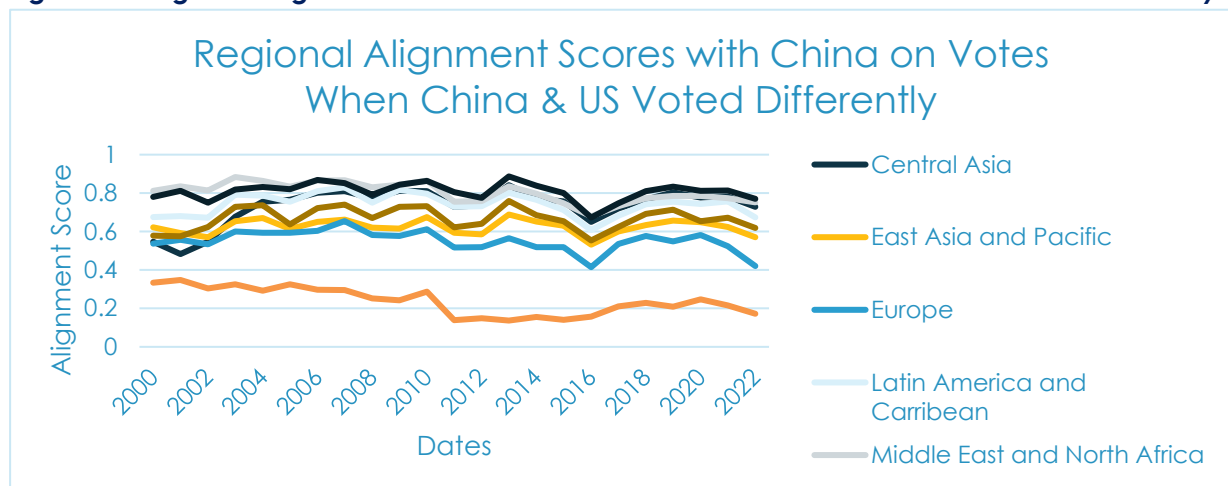
Another observation stemming from the rather stable alignment score with China during the last few decades, notwithstanding China’s rapidly increasing economic power, is that Sokolova’s (2019) thesis that “countries that trade together, vote together” does not hold. In

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that North America is excluded from this sample as alignment scores for important votes are extremely high.

other words, even though China's export share globally has more than doubled, its influence on UN voting has remained rather stable.

Disaggregated alignment scores by instances of China and the US voting in lockstep and when they voted differently back the results obtained so far, with some notable exceptions. When China and the US voted differently, which occurred for nearly 85 percent of votes, other regions largely reproduced the voting patterns they exhibited in all votes: most regions voted more closely to China than the US, except for Europe (Figure 14).

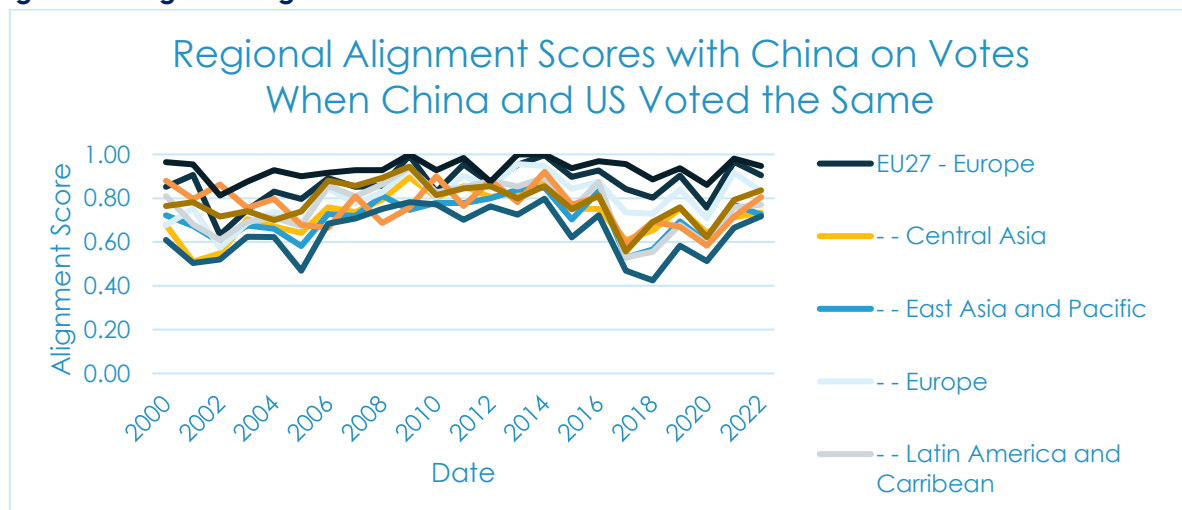
**Figure 14: Regional alignment scores with China on votes when China and US voted differently**



Source: Bruegel.

However, when China and the US cast the same vote, all other regions voted more similarly too. Affinity scores to China – and the US – rose dramatically to an average of nearly 0.85 when China and the US agreed on issues. This may indicate that the voted topics were uncontroversial, or that when two of the UN's most powerful and contentious nations agreed on an issue, the entire system became more cohesive too (Figure 15). This finding shows that, when US and China vote in the same direction, there does not seem to be a dissenting voice that drives countries away from both China and the US.

**Figure 15: Regional alignment scores with China in votes when China and US voted the same**

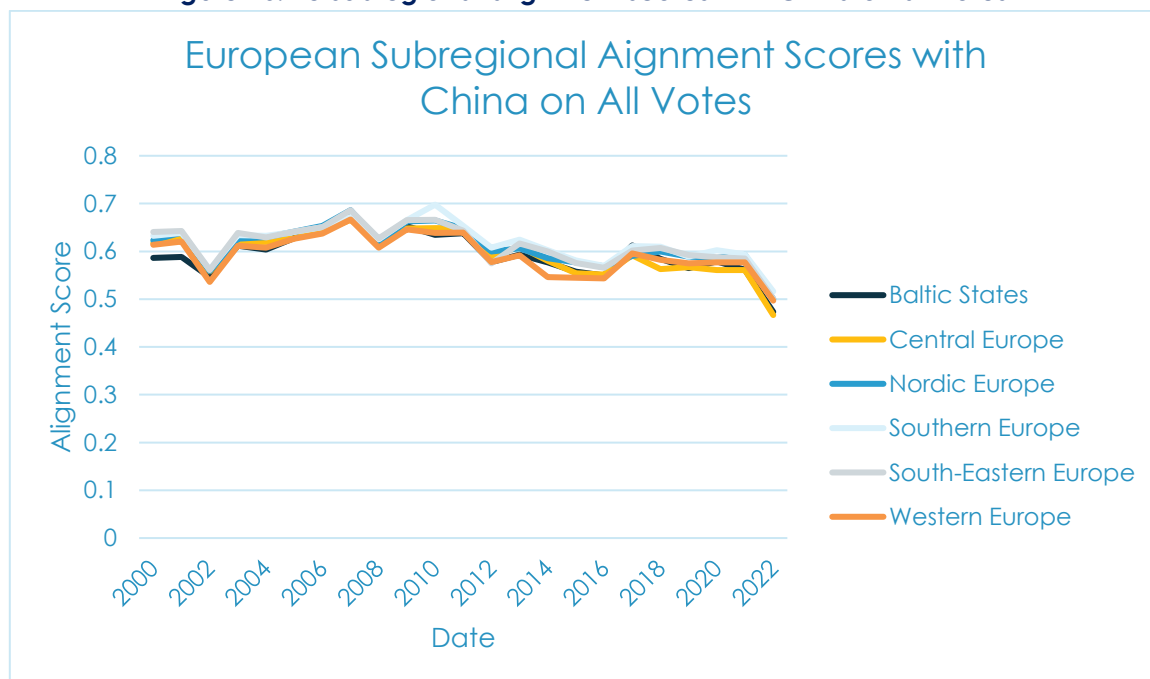


Source: Bruegel.

### Are EU member states more aligned to China or the US?

EU member states seem to be very aligned when voting at the UNGA. We compare subregions, namely, the Baltics, Central Europe, the Nordic countries, Southern and South-Eastern Europe and their voting profiles are really very similar. From 2004 to 2013, European alignment with Chinese voting patterns was more elevated, reaching a maximum of 0.7. Since then, European alignment with China has dropped to a new average ranging from 0.55 to 0.61. While limited, this change marks a clear departure from previous periods and coincides with the beginning of Chinese President Xi Jinping's tenure (Figure 16).

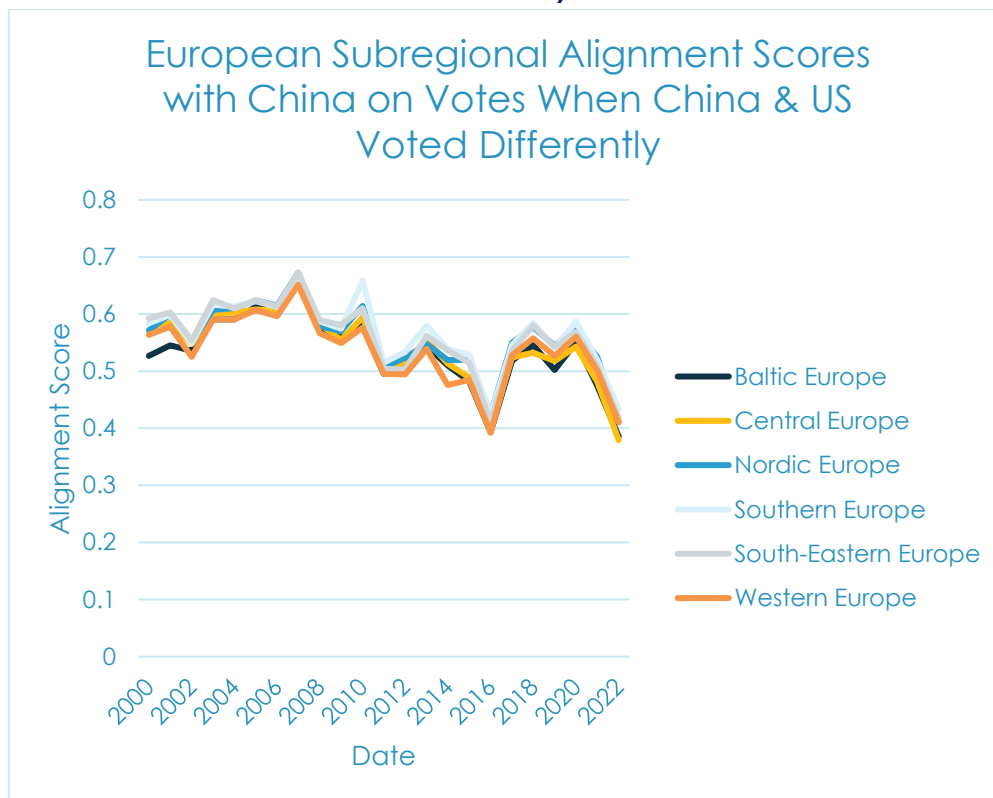
**Figure 16: EU subregional alignment scores with China on all votes**



Source: Bruegel.

EU countries tend to have diverged even more from China's votes at UNGA over the past few years when focusing on the sub-sample of votes when China and the US take opposite votes.

**Figure 17: EU subregional alignment scores with China on votes when China and the US voted differently**

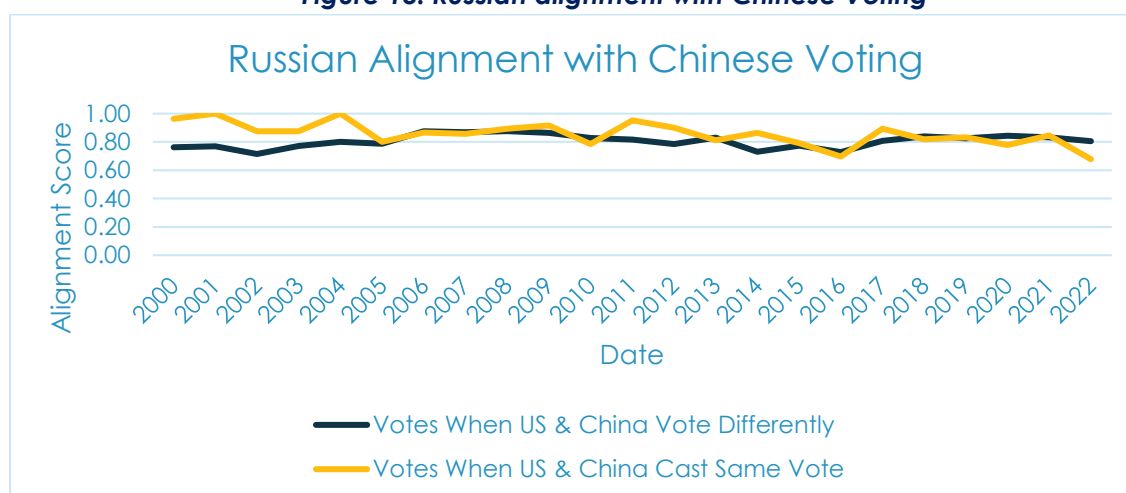


Source: Bruegel.

When China and the US voted differently, European alignment scores with China were substantially lower, indicating that in 80 percent of all votes, EU countries voted more closely in alignment with the US. Their average alignment score hovered near 0.6 from 2000 to 2008, but fell thereafter, until it reached its current lowest level of 0.4. The change was significant, and became outright precipitous in 2020, dropping from 0.55 to 0.4 in just two years (Figure 17). European unity, in terms of similarity of votes across EU subregions, remains strong.

### Russia's voting alignment with China

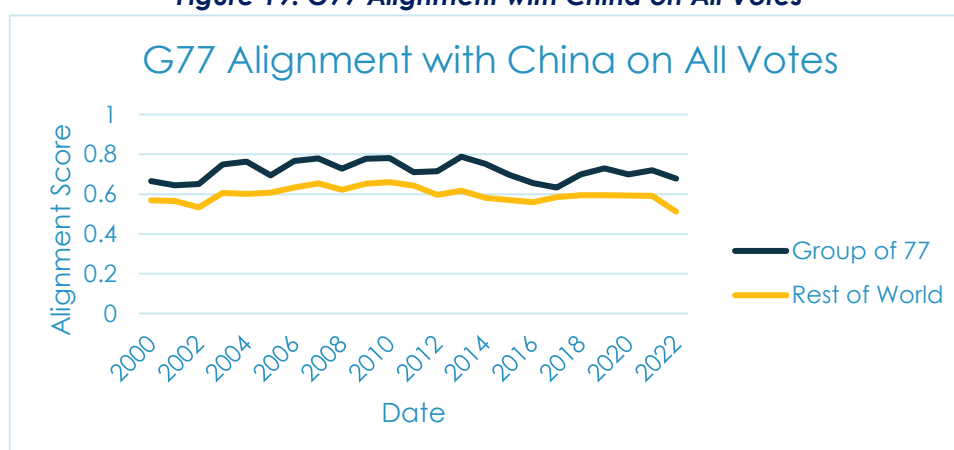
Russia has consistently maintained high alignment with Chinese voting patterns at the UN, whether on issues on which China and the US vote similarly. Russia's strong alignment with China reflects the close geopolitical relationship the two have fostered over the past several decades. This is not a new trend but has remained rather stable throughout our sample, with the notable exception of 2014, during the Crimea crisis, when the alignment score went down, until 2016. Russian alignment with Chinese voting patterns remained stable, however, in 2022 after the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine. Most insightful is that Russia's alignment with China predates the strategic convergence international observers noted in the lead-up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and reached a consistent maximum average of around 0.8 from 2006 to the present (Figure 18).

**Figure 18: Russian alignment with Chinese Voting**

Source: Bruegel.

### G77 Alignment with China

The Group of 77, a coalition of 133 countries from the Global South, exhibits substantially more alignment with China than that with the rest of the world. The G77 consistently exhibits greater alignment with China by a margin of about 0.1, sometimes growing to a maximum of nearly 0.2 as occurred in 2014. From 2016 to 2018, however, the G77's alignment with China decreased to a minimum of just 0.03. During that time, the G77 exhibited nearly the same degree of voting alignment with China as the rest of the world.

**Figure 19: G77 Alignment with China on All Votes**

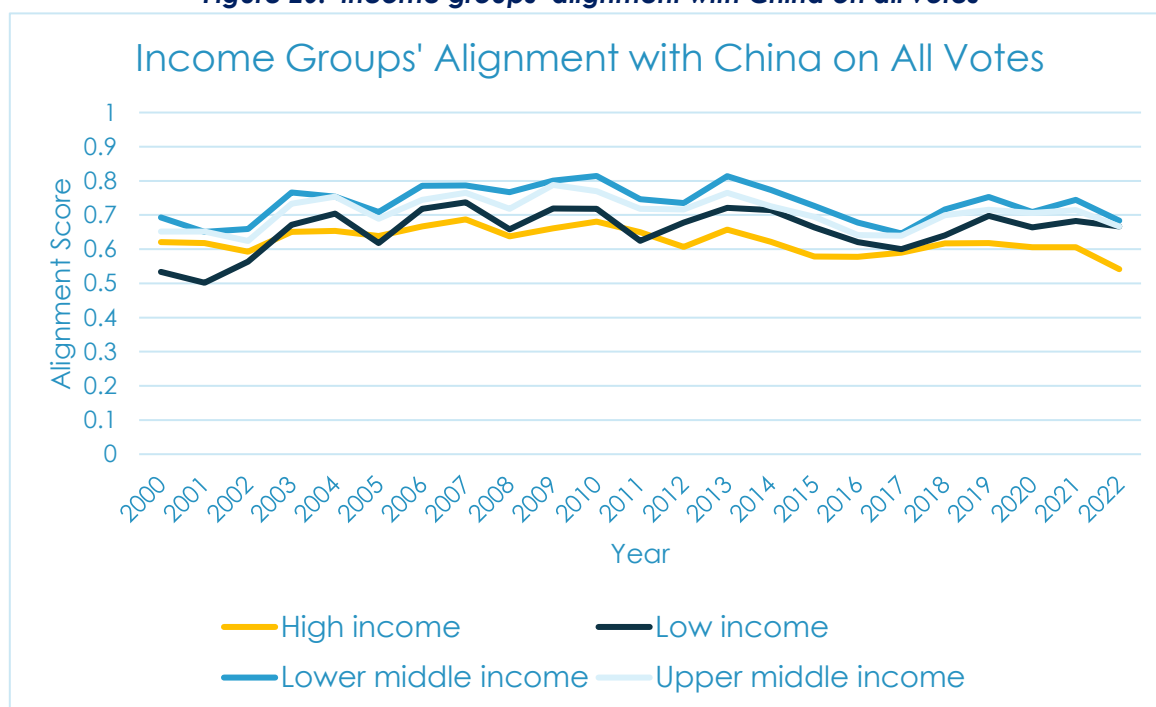
Source: Bruegel.

### Income as key determinant of voting alignment

Our findings on the G77's closer alignment with Chinese voting patterns can be generalized further when controlling for the income per capita of each UN member. In particular, countries in the lowest income group align more with China than those in middle- or upper-income groups (Figure 20). The opposite is true for the US (Figure 21) although with an important difference, namely that even the high-income group – the group most aligned with US voting – is not as highly aligned with the US as all other groups are with China. High income countries

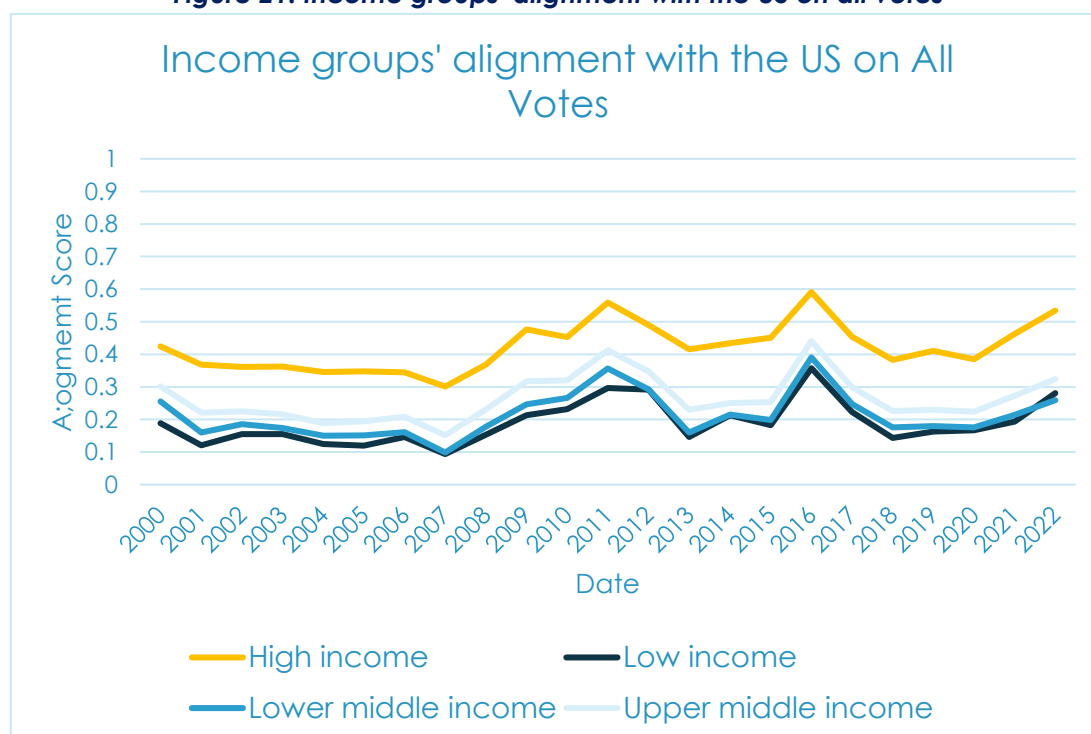
exhibit an alignment score of lower than 0.5 with the US, while alignment scores with China exhibit a minimum average of 0.6.

**Figure 20: Income groups' alignment with China on all votes**



Source: Bruegel.

**Figure 21: Income groups' alignment with the US on all votes**



Source: Bruegel.

## **Voting on Ukraine and Gaza: China vs. US**

To contextualise our analysis in today's key geopolitical issues, we use the same methodology to analyse voting behaviour in response to two ongoing conflicts of broad geopolitical importance: Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the Israel-Hamas War.

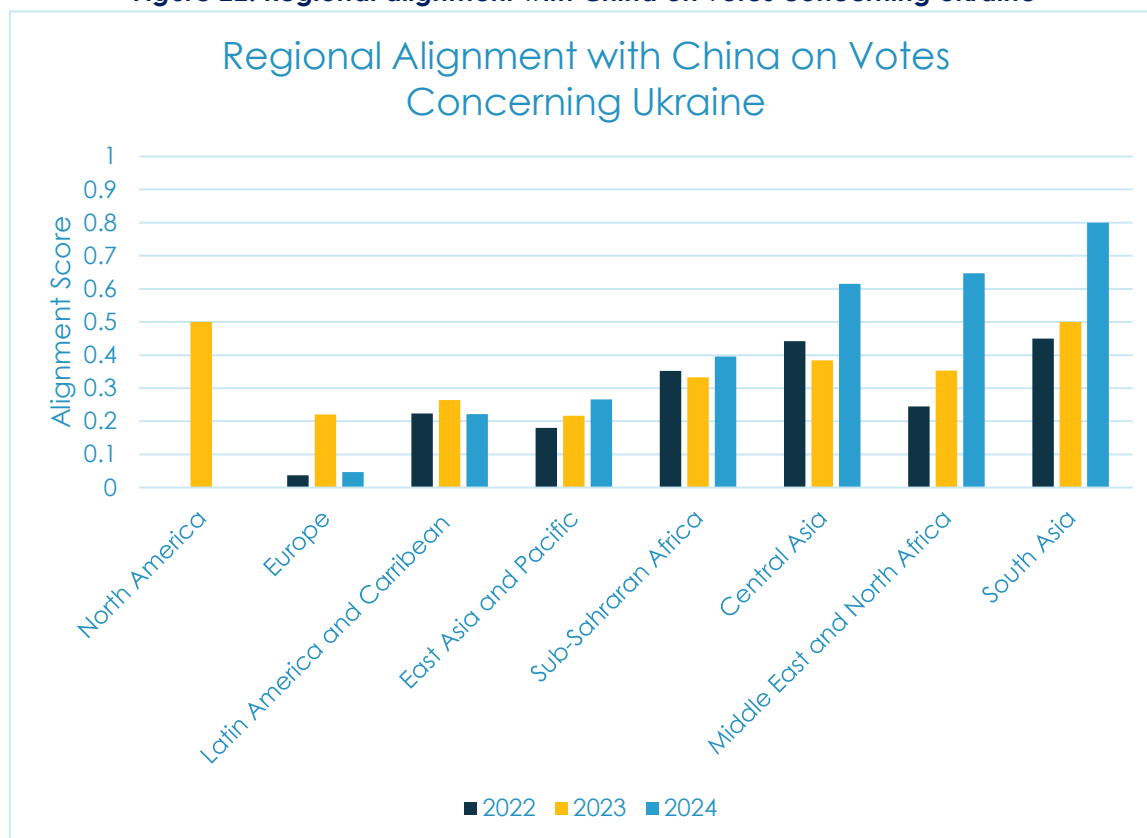
We include in our analysis all the relevant UNGA votes since the beginning of both conflicts, up to October 2024, and estimate alignment scores with China and the US (see Annex 2 for votes included). By relevant votes we refer to all votes that condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas War.

On Russia's aggression against Ukraine, eight votes directly address the invasion of Ukraine and its political, economic and humanitarian consequences since February 2022, and one vote concerns the suspension of Russia's role in the UN Human Rights Council. On Israel, 13 votes were included from October 2023, concerning the political status of Palestinian residents and refugees, as well as the humanitarian and political rights of Palestine at the UN, and a resolution concerning financing of the interim force in Lebanon, responsible for limiting confrontations between Israel and Hezbollah.

Confirming the polarisation in these two cases, the United States and China voted differently in all the 43 votes in our sample. The polarisation is less clear with regards to the EU, as it votes very closely to the US on resolutions pertaining to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but more closely to China on those concerning the Israel-Hamas War.

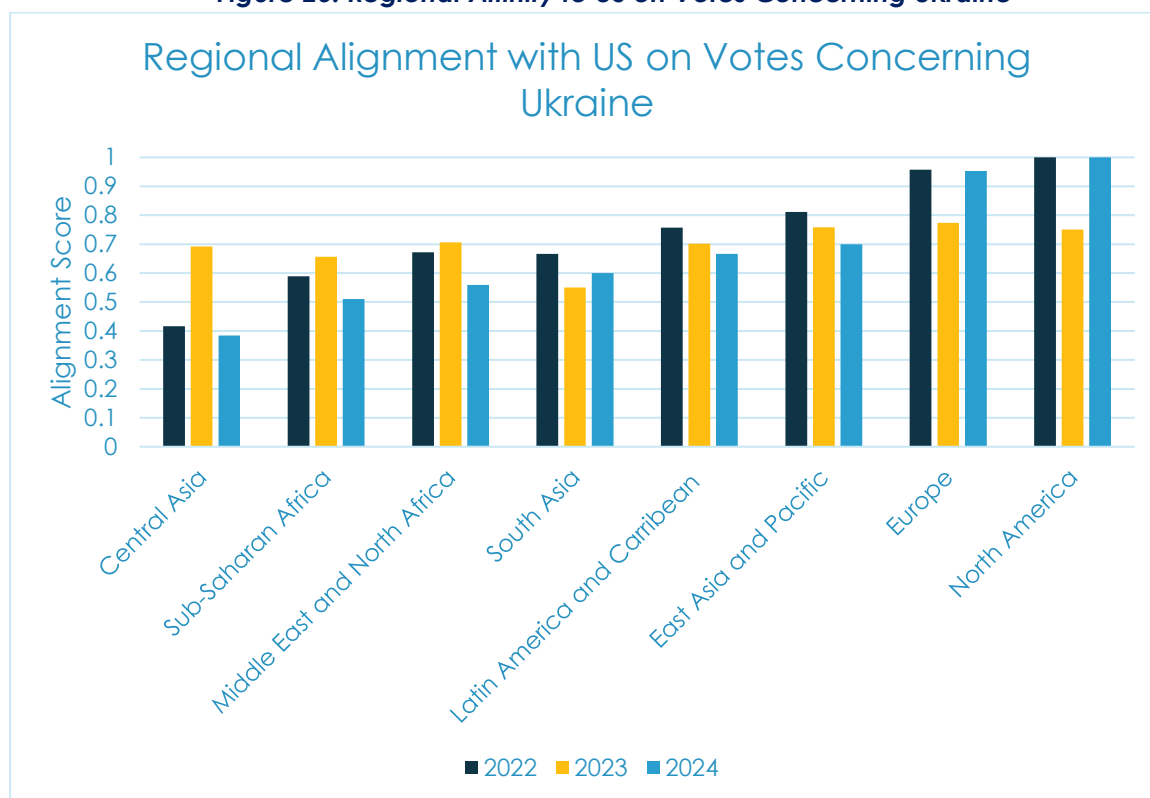
Regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, voting alignment with China increased in 2024, especially for South and Central Asia but also the Middle East and North Africa (Figure 22). Meanwhile, on average over 2022-2024, no region displays an average alignment score with China higher than 0.56 except for South Asia. Alignment scores with China have risen in 2024 for three blocks that represent a significant number of countries – South Asia, Middle East/North Africa and Central Asia – but it should be noted that there have only been two resolutions at UNGA on this topic in 2024 by time of writing. Only Europe increased its alignment with US voting patterns in 2024 (Figure 23). However, the figures show that most of the world votes closer to the US on this issue – more so than on the averages of votes analysed from 2000.

**Figure 22: Regional alignment with China on votes concerning Ukraine**



Source: Bruegel.

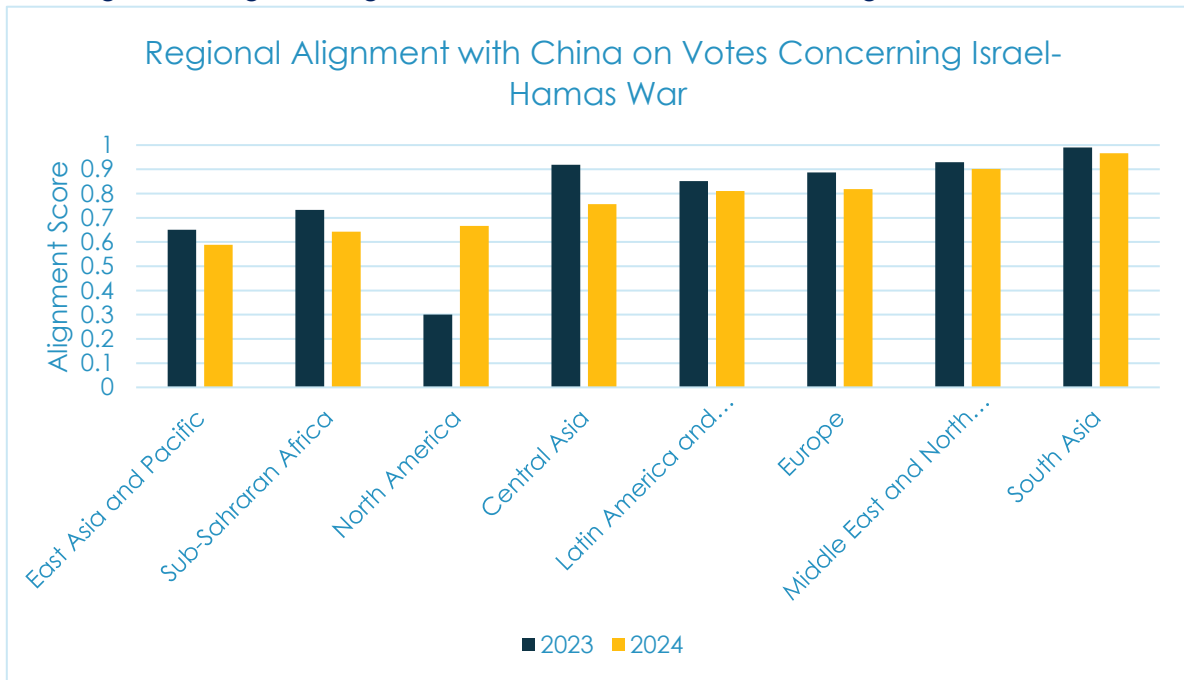
**Figure 23: Regional Affinity to US on Votes Concerning Ukraine**



Source: Bruegel.

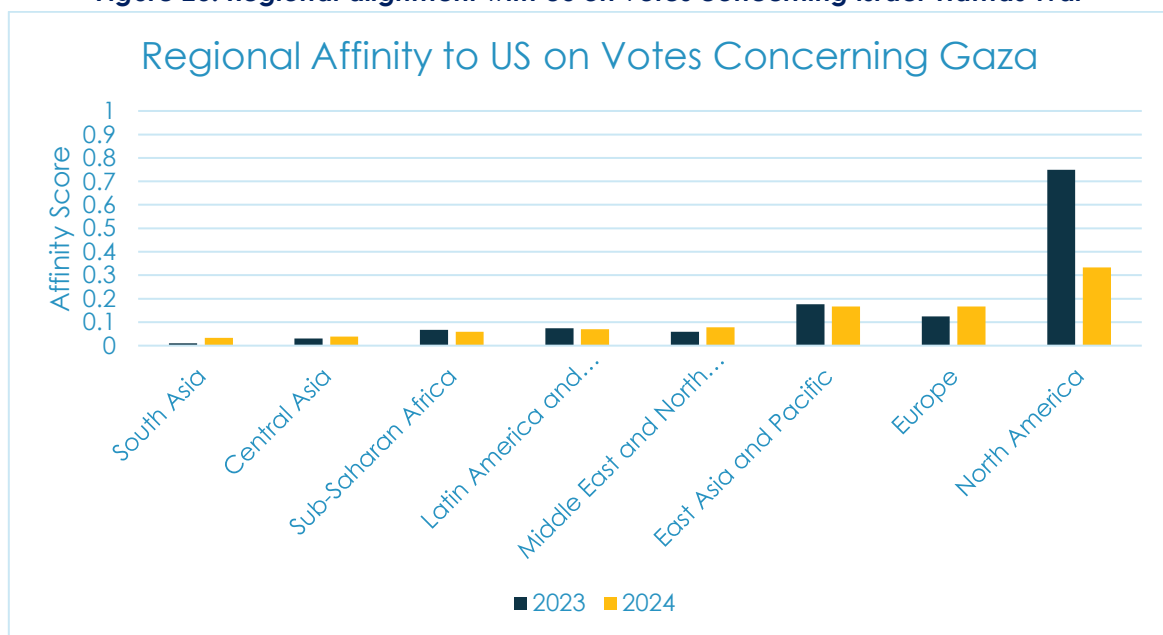
Regarding the Israel-Hamas War, voting alignment with China is generally higher but decreased slightly in 2024 for most geographies, except for North America. Alignment scores with the US are very low and have not increased in 2024 (with a big reduction for North America). The EU is clearly much closer to the US on Ukraine than it is on the Israel-Hamas War, although its alignment with China on this matter has come down somewhat in 2024 (Figures 24 and 25). The EU's alignment with China on Israel-related votes is high, at over 0.8 on average for 2023-2024. Two outliers with closer affinities to the US are Hungary and Czechia.

**Figure 24: Regional alignment with China on votes concerning Israel-Hamas War**



Source: Bruegel.

**Figure 25: Regional alignment with US on votes concerning Israel-Hamas War**



Source: Bruegel.

## 5. Conclusions

We investigate China's influence in the United Nations (UN) by focusing on the promotion of its narratives (words) and its voting behaviour (deeds). For the former, we assess the extent to which China's global initiatives have become embedded in UN discourse compared to Western ones. For the latter, we assess the degree to which countries, regions and voting coalitions align their UN General Assembly votes with China, compared to the US.

When it comes to words, China's global initiatives– which have expanded and now focus primarily on a global audience – are sometimes more discussed at the UN than Western global initiatives. More specifically, the Belt and Road Initiative has had a much greater impact on UN discourse than any Western initiative and certainly much more than the EU's counteroffer – the Global Gateway. Still, other Chinese global initiatives do not stand out compared to those from the West, with the Global Compact for Migration featuring more prominently at the UN than any Chinese initiative other than the BRI. Our analysis of the geographical distribution of countries linked to Chinese and Western initiatives in UN documents finds that Chinese initiatives are more self-referential than those of the West and mention the US more often than partners in emerging economies. Western initiatives, instead, tend to mention countries targeted by their initiatives more frequently. Finally, we also find that security is the most relevant theme in China's global initiatives, but also very much so for Western initiatives with aid and human rights listed as the second most discussed topics in the context of Chinese and Western global initiatives.

Moving to voting patterns (deeds) measured by alignment scores, we find that countries are more aligned with China than the US, but that this result is mostly driven by the larger number of emerging and developing countries voting at the UN compared to high-income countries. In fact, we find that income per capita is a very good indicator of voting alignment as higher income countries are closer to US voting patterns than middle- or low-income countries. Russia has an exceedingly high alignment with Chinese voting patterns throughout our sample. In other words, it predates its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and even the Crimean crisis. EU countries are more closely aligned with the US, especially when we consider only votes designated as important for the US. Finally, voting alignment with China is generally very stable across geographies without noticeably increasing over the past few years. The latter finding is quite surprising if one considers China's growing economic power globally and the flurry of global initiatives that China has pushed into UN discourse.

Some policy conclusions can be extracted from the above. First, Western narratives are not compelling and popular enough in the community of nations, but neither are all Chinese global narratives, except for the Belt and Road Initiatives. The limited impact of the Global Gateway is particularly poignant, which should make responsible EU officials reflect on how to better promote this initiative. Second, the Global South has long been aligned with China when voting at the General Assembly, but the EU has not as much, especially for votes that are important for the US. This is true for UN voting related to Russia's aggression of Ukraine but much less so for the Israel-Hamas war. Finally, it might be surprising to note that China's influence in the UN,

whether in terms of words or deeds, is quite stable even if China's economic global power has increased. While this finding might be reassuring for the EU, we should take it with caution as there are other parallel actions that China is pursuing such as chairing key committees or increasing the budgetary contributions to the UN which might change our findings in the future.

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