

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Exploring analogical transfer from interpersonal friend-foe beliefs to geopolitical evaluations: Evidence from an opinion survey in Beijing

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### ABSTRACT

Understanding the dynamics of public opinion requires attention to the cognitive processes through which personal beliefs and emotions shape issue-specific judgments, such as geopolitical evaluations in international conflicts. Drawing on rounds of opinion surveys and interviews conducted among young Chinese respondents from Generation Z in Beijing, this study explores whether interpersonal friend-foe beliefs are associated with attitudes towards the Russia-Ukraine war. The findings suggest that analogical transfer from interpersonal friend-foe beliefs to geopolitical evaluations can be observed, but only to a limited extent. Similar pro-Russia judgments pointed to the perceived importance of Russia in countering Western containment rather than interpersonal relational reasoning. Moreover, an “us-versus-them” mindset rooted in such interpersonal logic was associated with a tendency among those who valued Russia’s energy supply to view Russia as part of “us” and to prioritise offering it support. Among respondents who perceive Russia as a longstanding good friend, support appears to rest more on historically grounded relational affinity than on threat-oriented friend-foe beliefs. Overall, the results indicate that analogical transfer operates as one possible cognitive pathway among several shaping geopolitical evaluations within this Beijing-based cohort.

**Keywords:** interpersonal relationship beliefs; analogical transfer; geopolitical evaluations; opinion survey; young Chinese from Generation Z

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary information environment often described as “post-truth”<sup>[1]</sup>, growing attention has been directed towards how personal beliefs and emotions shape issue-specific judgment formation and contribute to the dynamics of public opinion, particularly from an exploratory social-cognitive perspective. Undoubtedly social and cognitive psychology has played a predominant role for decades in understanding the ways in which we think and reason in various fields around us. As David Houghton who authored *Political Psychology* points out, with the analogical reasoning as cognitive short cuts – for instance – decision-makers could make sense of what’s happening by inferring from what have been learnt from the past experiences or situations<sup>[2]</sup>.

Within people’s belief systems, the interpersonal relationship one always involves their core principles

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about how to figure out who's a friend and who's not. In this way, friendly or hostile sentiments can be shown towards specific person. In contrast, whenever topics of international relations are discussed, people also tend to show a certain degree of friendliness or hostility towards a specific country, judging whether it is a friend or a foe from the standpoint or interests of their own nation. Thus, it is worth investigating the extent to which analogical reasoning could occur between beliefs about interpersonal relationships and geopolitical evaluations in international conflicts, particularly regarding the emergence of friendliness and/or hostility. In other words, to what extent can the rules for dealing with interpersonal relationships be applied to their judgement about international relations?

## **2. Literature review**

Before turning to the empirical part of the opinion survey, it is essential to lay a theoretical foundation to better understand how collectively held beliefs within public opinion may shape foreign policy-making, as well as how knowledge about international affairs is formed through underlying cognitive processes. This study approaches these questions primarily through the classical social-cognitive tradition, drawing on foundational insights into how individuals structure social judgments and relational perceptions.

### **2.1. Why opinion matters: Dynamic interactions between public opinion and foreign policy formation**

To better understand how foreign policy decision has been made, it is always necessary to explore its relation to the belief systems of policy-makers, not only the “operational code” under which the particular choice was made for this time, but also those wider, collectively-held beliefs that always breed their shared worldviews and ideologies as fundamental references<sup>[3]</sup>. Empirical studies also indicate that public opinion could be integrated into the process of foreign policy-making, to the extent that policymakers at least need to assess in advance what kind of reactions a foreign policy might provoke amongst the public domestically – with reference either to a sampled pilot survey or to their knowledge of the pre-existing belief systems of the public where relevant inferences can be made<sup>[4]</sup>. For instance, one's fundamental views of war can be used to infer his/her attitude towards specific policy such as deployment of troops abroad, as is often the case that a hawk is proved to support the military intervention by many studies<sup>[5]</sup>.

Notably, “interests”, “ideologies” and “identities” – all of which are seen as vital considerations for policymaking with regard to international issues – can be constructed by collectively-held beliefs shared between policymakers and the public<sup>[6]</sup>. For instance, shared beliefs derived from collective memory and/or historical-cultural narratives could contribute largely to the ethno-national identity, as in the case of Balkan political-religious conflicts<sup>[7]</sup> and the Partition of Ireland<sup>[8]</sup>. Moreover, beliefs in defending national sovereignty are always particularly strong among the public when facing foreign aggression or provocation (i.e. threats or invasions), which can easily translate into support for their government's tough response including waging a war like British public's durable support for Thatcher's Conservative government in the 1982 Falklands War<sup>[9]</sup>. From embassy attacks to missile deployment disputes in the past decades, such “rally around the flag” consensus consistently recur in many countries whenever an international crisis arises<sup>[10]</sup>. Similar reactions from both sides are also exhibited in relation to humanitarian relief efforts to help foreign civilians suffering through famine and war<sup>[11]</sup>.

Additionally, public scrutiny grounded in these shared beliefs can exert pressure that shapes or redirects the government's foreign policy decision-making process. On the one hand, the withdrawal from an overseas war, for instance, can be largely driven by pressure from the domestic public due to their questioning of the justification for continuing it. Historically speaking, the outrage over the endless casualties, the concerns about its enormous financial costs, and the worries regarding the diversion of resources from domestic

priorities amounted to the pressure that ultimately led to the withdrawal of US troops from the Vietnam in 1973<sup>[12]</sup> and a similar case in Afghanistan<sup>[13]</sup>. On the other hand, with the advent of various forms of social media, the dissemination of information that has become increasingly accelerated and diversified can easily convince the public of the necessity to pressure governments for more transparent decision-making and more immediate action in a way that they believe as “proper” – a more advanced form of “real-time mode” beyond the earlier CNN-effect<sup>[14]</sup>.

## 2.2. How opinion operates: Cognitions about international affairs as public knowledge

When it comes to cognitions about the “world outside”, one of the most influential pioneering works can be traced back to Walter Lippmann’s 1922 book *Public Opinion* that overwhelmingly emphasised the “pictures in [one’s] head”<sup>[15]</sup>. The role of such schematic models was insightfully pointed out by Lippmann: “The way in which *the world is imagined* determines at any particular moment what men will do... It determines their effort, their feeling, their hopes... (italics for emphasis)”<sup>[15]</sup>. Subsequent scholarly attempts have been consistently made to explore such psychological processes regarding how and why people think and act in certain ways especially before and/or on the voting day of various vital political occasions. Ranging from Paul F. Lazarsfeld’s study of 1940 US-presidential election voting<sup>[16]</sup> to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s investigation of dynamic opinion changes before two federal elections in the 1960-70s Western Germany<sup>[17]</sup>, it is evident that, with regard to these key issues that play a decisive role in shaping voting outcomes, people’s beliefs and knowledge – along with the sources from which these understanding are derived – are always of great importance.

Among the issues to which voters attach significant importance, any matter – whether domestic or foreign – could become salient insofar as it is perceived to be directly related to their own interests. Issues relating to foreign policy, as McCombs and Shaw once found, have become one of the top two items of the agenda when it comes to public discourses especially mass media coverage during the 1968 U.S. - presidential election<sup>[18]</sup>. In this process, voters’ knowledge of international relations/affairs and especially cognitions about the situations of Vietnam War then undoubtedly could help them better assess the efficacy of candidates’ proposed foreign policy as well as candidates’ capabilities of handling similar issues/conflicts in the coming years. In this sense, it is worthwhile exploring to what extent and from which source people can acquire their knowledge and relevant information about international affairs/relations<sup>[19]</sup>, just like many other areas of public affairs (such as public health and environmental protection) that can be all defined as “public knowledge” – knowledge about public life<sup>[20, 21]</sup>.

In this way, the extent to which people know about international affairs – or international knowledge as termed by some researchers – and the ways in which they acquire them<sup>[22]</sup>, as well as how relevant attitudes can be affected, have become the main focus of various surveys conducted either by think tanks or by opinion research teams. For example, findings from Pew Research Centre, one of the most renowned survey institutions, ascribe the variations in international knowledge levels among the general public to factors such as “personal interests of relevant international topics”, “international news exposure/engagement”, “education background” and so on<sup>[23]</sup>. On the one hand, whether individuals are aware of certain facts (such as “Ukraine is not part of NATO”) can significantly shape their attitudes towards international affairs, especially ongoing conflicts. Glasgow Media Group’s serial studies on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for instance showed that the absence of key historical elements about one side in news reports could make it difficult for those audience without prior knowledge to understand and legitimise certain actions of this side<sup>[24, 25]</sup>. On the other hand, reasoning processes should be explored in relation to which items of information/knowledge can play a vital role in relevant judgement-making, and which sources these items are derived from can be always viewed as trustworthy<sup>[26]</sup>.

### 2.3. Where opinion emerges: Some cognitive processes underlying judgement formation

It is not uncommon that knowledge and insights gained in one field can be transferred and analogically applied to many other ones that share similar features. This kind of analogical reasoning, in essence, reflects our “active construction of the reality” with the help of schemas<sup>[27]</sup>. Using analogies from familiar concepts or experiences, not only allow us to render complex situations that we already understand in a clearer and more accessible way to others, but also deepen our own understanding of ambiguous situations as cognitive shortcuts. For example, to cooperate or to compete – the core idea derived from the game theory – draws an analogy between interpersonal relationships and group-level interactions like international/inter-institutional relations<sup>[28]</sup>. More specifically, the main determinants of interpersonal conflict, such as incompatible goals and divergent desires, can also help to explain why regional disputes occurred; meanwhile, all the fundamental question for coalitions ranging from individual to institutional forms is to address “who joins with whom” and “for what reason”<sup>[29]</sup>.

Notably, the “friend or foe” question illustrates one of the most typical situations in which a choice needs to be made either by an individual or a group to determine the nature of a relationship with others. Regarding interpersonal relationships, one may have developed a schema of “a true friend” that could contain attributes such as “trustworthiness”, “faithfulness”, “devotedness”, and “supportiveness” – all of which could serve as a cognitive basis for one’s further judgement of a particular person according to the way that person treats him/her. However, abstract topics like international relations are far beyond what ordinary people can sense through their own direct experience, which instead can be well informed by various forms of political discourses ranging from historical memories to contemporary realities. In this process, analogical reasoning has always been employed, especially in diplomatic and media narratives, to explain the complexities between nations<sup>[2]</sup>, as in rhetoric like “*bond of brotherhood* between the two nations (italics for emphasis)” to emphasise a particular foreign country as a “longstanding good friend”. Similar analogies can also be drawn by the public from their own interpersonal interactions when attempting to understand concepts like “mutual trust”, “humanitarian assistance”, as well as “stand-off” and “deterioration of relations” between nations.

Further discussions about interpersonal relationship arose especially when such friend-foe judgement has been extended to cover a third person/party, as exemplified by claims like “my enemy’s enemy is my friend” (or “we like someone who dislikes someone we dislike”)<sup>[30]</sup> and many other triadic interaction variants. Of them, four situations (i.e. “the friend of my friend is my friend, the friend of my enemy is my enemy, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, the enemy of my friend is my enemy”) were pointed out by Heider<sup>[31]</sup> as “balanced” states – which, as Heider argues, tend to be preferred by people for the reason of harmony. Subsequent empirical studies related to interpersonal interactions seemed to have proved this (e.g. Aronson and Cope’s study<sup>[30]</sup> mentioned earlier). With the gradual application of psychological approach in the field of international affairs and especially the growing emphasis on those of decision-makings, since 1990s such analogical reasonings have also been applied to issues involved with triangular international relations. For instance, mathematical model derived from the claim that “the friend of my enemy is my enemy” was employed to explain why hostility exists between nations<sup>[32]</sup>; the duration of a certain dyadic relation embedded in various types of triangles were also explored in terms of “stable blocs”<sup>[33]</sup>; historical records between nations for centuries were coded and used to demonstrate the existence of “imbalanced” international relations such as nations sharing common enemies could also have conflicts with each other<sup>[34, 35]</sup>.

While recent studies in political psychology have further expanded the analysis of political cognition, this study draws primarily on these foundational social-cognitive insights to conceptualise how interpersonal relational heuristics may extend to geopolitical evaluations.

### 3. Sample and methods

To examine whether analogical transfer may occur between interpersonal relational cognition and evaluative judgments in international politics, a series of empirical surveys were conducted between 2024 and 2025 in Beijing. The study focuses on a cohort of Beijing-based Generation Z respondents and investigates their attitudes towards the Russia–Ukraine war, one of the most consequential international conflicts in recent years.

The primary objective of this research is not to generate nationally representative estimates of public opinion, but to explore the existence and relative strength of theoretically specified cognitive mechanisms. Accordingly, a total of 1,223 young Chinese respondents from Generation Z were recruited in Beijing. Given the localised and cohort-specific nature of the sample, the findings should be interpreted as context-bound and exploratory rather than generalizable to the broader Chinese population. Data collection was carried out in three rounds of questionnaire surveys administered in June 2024, July 2024, and June 2025. All surveys were conducted in Beijing using the same questionnaire instrument. The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale and consisted primarily of statements measuring respondents' beliefs and attitudes towards interpersonal relationships and their perceptions of the Russia–Ukraine conflict (see **Table 1**). Of the 1,223 individuals recruited, 1,040 valid responses were obtained, yielding an overall response rate of 85%.

In this study, analogical transfer is operationalised as the extent to which interpersonal relational heuristics are associated with evaluative stances towards an international conflict. Specifically, three items derived from Heider's balance theory were used to capture friend–foe relational reasoning in interpersonal contexts (see A1–A3 in **Table 1**). These items reflect theoretically grounded manifestations of triadic balance logic. Although the inter-item correlations varied ( $r = .266\text{--}.521$ ), they loaded on a shared conceptual domain and demonstrated modest internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .65$ ), which is acceptable given the small number of items and their functional heterogeneity. These items were therefore retained as exploratory indicators of relational alignment reasoning rather than as a fully unified personality scale. To further assess construct validity, an exploratory factor analysis (principal axis factoring) was conducted on the three balance-rule items. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was .591, reaching the minimum acceptable threshold given the small number of items, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2 = 41.651$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating suitability for factor analysis. A single factor emerged, with substantial loadings for all three items (A1 = .824; A2 = .819; A3 = .603). This pattern suggests that the items share a common latent dimension, reflecting a general tendency to evaluate third parties through relational alignment logic. In other words, respondents differ in the extent to which they rely on triadic relational inference when forming judgments about others. Although internal consistency was moderate (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .65$ ), the factor-analytic results support the construct validity of the operationalisation. These reliability and factor analysis results indicate that the items capture a coherent dimension of relational alignment reasoning, providing an empirical basis for the subsequent correlation and regression analyses.

In addition, two items were included to capture affect-driven relational tendencies distinct from balance-based reasoning. One item measured unconditional positive loyalty (see A4 in **Table 1**), while another assessed devaluation driven by dislike (see A5 in **Table 1**). Although conceptually related as affect-based evaluative biases, these items did not demonstrate sufficient internal consistency to justify aggregation ( $\alpha < .60$ ). They were therefore analysed separately in order to avoid imposing artificial coherence on

conceptually differentiated affective mechanisms. Attitudes towards the Russia–Ukraine conflict were measured through three justificatory frames of support for Russia (i.e. historical friendship, energy security, and opposition to Ukraine–Western alignment, see B1-B3 in **Table 1**). These items were moderately to strongly intercorrelated ( $r = .511-.678$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and demonstrated good internal reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .80$ ), justifying their aggregation into a composite index representing overall pro-Russia stance (B\_total). Taken together, this measurement structure enables an empirical examination of whether endorsement of interpersonal relational heuristics is associated with justificatory frames in international conflict perception, thereby providing an operational test of analogical transfer.

Thus, this study adopts a heuristic-based operationalisation of friend–foe logic, focusing on respondents’ intuitive analogical reasoning rather than a full-scale psychological measurement. Based on the theoretical framework of this study, two hypotheses were formulated:

**H1:** Once a foreign country is identified as a true friend (or longstanding good friend), people tend to offer support for this specific country whenever possible, regardless of pragmatic considerations.

**H2:** Logics derived from interpersonal friend–foe relationships can be analogically transferred and applied to issues of international relations to varying degrees.

To complement the survey data and to gain further insight into respondents’ reasoning processes, follow-up focus group interviews were conducted. A total of 160 participants were drawn from the pool of survey respondents and assigned to sixteen focus groups. These qualitative discussions were used to explore how participants interpreted the survey questions and why they expressed particular views, thereby providing contextual support for the quantitative findings. The focus on Generation Z reflects the view that younger cohorts are particularly relevant for understanding emerging patterns of political cognition and international perception. Rather than claiming that their views are representative of the entire population, this study treats them as a theoretically meaningful group for examining the cognitive foundations of public opinion towards international conflicts.

**Table 1.** Key statements about beliefs and attitudes towards interpersonal relationships and international conflict.

		Level of Agreement (n=1040)	
		m	sd
A	Statements about beliefs and attitudes towards interpersonal relationships		
1	I believe that the enemy of my friend is also my enemy.	2.91	0.89
2	I believe that the friend of my enemy is also my enemy.	2.76	0.83
3	I believe that the enemy of my enemy can be my friend.	3.38	0.79
4	I will unconditionally support someone I like/love, even if they make mistakes.	2.34	0.99
5	Disliking someone can make me believe that everything he/she does is questionable and ought to be opposed.	2.22	0.93
B	Statements about beliefs and attitudes towards international conflict		
1	I support Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war, as Russia is a longstanding good friend of China.	2.8	0.92
2	I support Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war, as Russia supplies China with substantial amounts of oil and natural gas	2.92	0.83
3	I support Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war, because I dislike Ukraine’s collusion with the Western adversarial powers.	2.62	0.71

## 4. Results

As explained earlier, collectively shared belief systems may contribute to broader political discourse by shaping how international events are interpreted within particular social contexts. In China, official narratives have frequently emphasised the importance of China–Russia cooperation in diplomatic settings. While this study does not examine policy formation or governmental decision-making, exploring how a cohort of Beijing-based Generation Z respondents interpret the Russia–Ukraine war offers insight into the relational and cognitive frameworks operating within this specific social group. Such analysis contributes to understanding how geopolitical events are cognitively structured at the individual level, without making claims about broader national representativeness or policy influence.

### 4.1. Longstanding good friend or not? Who supports Russia in this conflict and for what reasons?

As cognitive correlation matrix for all surveyed respondents (n=1040) shows in **Table 2** below, three overwhelming forms of support for Russia are strongly positively correlated with each other. As mentioned earlier, the substantial intercorrelations among B1, B2, and B3 (ranging from .511 to .678, all  $p < .01$ ) indicate internal consistency across different justificatory rationales of support (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .80$ ). A composite index (B\_total) was therefore constructed to capture overall pro-Russia stance.

**Table 2.** Correlation matrix related to all kinds of support for Russia for all surveyed respondents (n=1040).

<b>B</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
1	I support Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war, as Russia is a longstanding good friend of China.	1	.678**	.511**
2	I support Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war, as Russia supplies China with substantial amounts of oil and natural gas		1	.553**
3	I support Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war, because I dislike Ukraine’s collusion with the Western adversarial powers.			1

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed)

A linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether unconditional affective support (A4) predicts overall pro-Russia attitude (B\_total). The model was statistically significant,  $F(1, 1038) = 4.19$ ,  $p = .043$ . Thus, A4 emerged as a positive predictor of pro-Russia attitude ( $\beta = .199$ ,  $t = 2.047$ ,  $p = .043$ ), accounting for 3.9% of the variance in the dependent variable ( $R^2 = .039$ ). This result provides partial support for Hypothesis 1 and is consistent with the proposition that affective loyalty tendencies in interpersonal contexts are modestly associated with geopolitical alignment preferences. Although the explanatory power is limited, the finding suggests that emotional friend-identification may represent one contributory pathway—alongside strategic and ideological considerations—through which international political attitudes are formed.

On the one hand, amongst those who ticked the boxes on the questionnaires to indicate they hadn’t taken a clear stand on which side to support (n=405), 1) about 34% considered it irrelevant to them and not worth their attention; 2) 42% think it’s difficult to say who’s right or wrong as they believe both sides are at fault; 3) plus another 24% expressed explicit disagreement with any reason given for supporting Russia in this war – notably, despite acknowledging China-Russia friendship, some participants showed their reluctance to lend support when it comes to the war, believing these are two different things. Just as one participant puts, “Even though China and Russia have pretty close relations, that doesn’t mean I should support Russia when it started a military conflict with another country” (Participant C of Group 15). On the other hand, for those respondents who indicated they had taken a clear stand on which side to support

(n=635), about 44% showed overwhelmingly full support for Russia in this Russia-Ukraine war since 2022 – this percentage is consistent with a result of 40.2% in support from an online opinion survey by China Data Lab<sup>[36]</sup>, with another 28.6% Russia supporters mingled with sympathies towards Ukraine. For both types of Russian supporters, 48% showed the support for Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war on the grounds that “Russia is a longstanding good friend of China”. Amongst them (n=221), almost three fourth (i.e. 72.7%) are also in favour of another reason for supporting Russia that “Russia supplies China with substantial amounts of oil and natural gas”. At the same time, more than half (i.e. 59%) of these Russia-longstanding-friend supporters agreed disliking “Ukraine’s collusion with the Western adversarial powers” also contributed to their support for Russia in this war.

Notably, as shown by our surveys and interviews –almost acknowledged as a consensus – securing the supply of oil and gas (which are vital strategic resources for economic development) are widely considered as central to safeguarding China’s national core interests. Not surprisingly, the role of Russia as China’s supplier with substantial oil and natural gas has been given precedence over that consideration of “longstanding good friend” listed in **Table 1** – which clarifies an earlier finding by the Carter Center where an online survey by the UCPM (US-China Perception Monitor) only states that “75% of Chinese respondents believed supporting Russia in this war is in China’s national interest” (quoted in Tao & Tantular<sup>[37]</sup>) that could cause confusion for failing to identify what specific interests they considered to be at stake. This echoes the current official stance of both sides that has defined China-Russia bilateral relationship as “comprehensive strategic partnership” (as reported by Xinhua news agency on 6 June 2019, China and Russia agreed to upgrade their relations to “a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era”<sup>[38]</sup>), which goes beyond a simple energy trade partnership with broader implications for strategic stability and national interests. However, to some participants, tangible interests are considered far more reliable than the mere rhetoric of proclaimed “friendship”, not to mention the fact that Russia no longer identifies itself as a socialist state which makes the once-popular, ideologically bilateral catchphrase “comrades plus brothers” seem obsolete in today’s context. Some participants echoed this by stating: “A kind of strategic partnership based on each country’s own interests” (Participant B of Group 4); “I think they can only really be considered good partners” (Participant E of Group 16). The term “strategic partnership” in diplomatic discourse typically refers to pragmatic, interest-based cooperation, whereas the label “longstanding good friend” conveys a stronger sense of historically rooted trust and affective bonds. The former is therefore more limited in scope and emotional depth than the latter.

As this study finds, the positive association between threat-oriented friend-foe belief and energy-based support ( $r = .268, p = .006$ , see **Table 3**) suggests that patterns consistent with analogical transfer may be linked to heightened threat-alertness in some respondents. To determine the relative contribution of different interpersonal logics, a multiple linear regression was conducted with A2 (Strategic Alliance), A4 (Unconditional Support), and A5 (Adversary Distrust) as independent variables, and B2 (Energy-based Support) as the dependent variable. The overall model was statistically significant,  $F(3, 1036) = 3.73, p = .014$ , accounting for 10.1% of the variance ( $R^2 = .101$ ). When examining the individual predictors, A2 emerged as the strongest driver ( $\beta = .20, p = .057$ ), though it only reached marginal significance. Interestingly, A4 and A5, which were significant in bivariate analyses, did not reach significance in the multivariate model. This suggests that the “enemy of my enemy” logic (A2) carries the most predictive weight in explaining pragmatic support for Russia.

**Table 3.** Correlation matrix between a support for Russia and interpersonal relationship statements for all surveyed respondents (n=1040).

A		I support Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war, as Russia supplies China with substantial amounts of oil and natural gas
2	I believe that the friend of my enemy is also my enemy.	.268**
4	I will unconditionally support someone I like/love, even if they make mistakes.	.220*
5	Disliking someone can make me believe that everything he/she does is questionable and ought to be opposed.	.197*

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed)

**Table 4.** The attitude towards Russia as longstanding-good-friend moderates the relationship between “the belief/logic of treating a friend of a foe as a foe” and “valuing Russia as a strategic partner in energy supply”.

		Association (r) between “the belief/logic of treating a friend of a foe as a foe” and “supporting Russia in the war for its energy supply to China”
1	Those who support Russia in the war due to their positive attitude towards Russia as a “true friend” (n=221) (i.e. Those who approve the claim that “I support Russia in the war, as Russia is a longstanding good friend of China”)	.064
2	Those who disapprove the claim that “I support Russia in the war, as Russia is a longstanding good friend of China” (n=385)	.436**

\*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed)

To further explore the underlying mechanism, subgroup analyses were conducted based on how respondents primarily framed Russia. The positive association between threat-oriented friend-foe belief and energy-based support ( $r = .268$ ,  $p = .006$ ) appears conditional rather than uniform. Among respondents who perceive Russia primarily as a longstanding good friend, the correlation becomes non-significant, indicating that affective loyalty may override relational threat schemas in this subgroup. In contrast, among respondents whose support is grounded in national strategic interests, the correlation strengthens substantially ( $r = .436$ ,  $p = .006$ ). This pattern is consistent with the possibility that analogical transfer becomes more salient when international alignments are interpreted through a pragmatic security lens.

#### 4.2. Is the friend of my enemy really my enemy? To what extent can this belief be accepted, valued and transferred?

Meanwhile, of those who had stated clearly which side they stand with (n=635), more than half (i.e. 54%) showed the support for Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war on grounds of “their disapproval of Ukraine’s collusion with the Western adversarial powers”. This is not too far from a result of 61.6% according to an online opinion survey by China Data Lab<sup>[36]</sup> (The number of 61.6% was not presented by the survey directly but calculated by the author according to the statistics about the support for Russia by attitudes towards containment). It seemed it has drawn on the straight logic that “The friend of my enemy is also my enemy”: My enemy (Western adversarial powers) → Friend of my enemy (Ukraine) → Against my enemy (aka. Supporting Russia). But on the contrary to the large volume application of this expectation, it found that less than one fifth (16.3%) of these Ukraine-West-collusion opposition participants agreed with this claim and showed the assumed analogical transfer, as shown by statements like “I think Ukraine shouldn’t be too close to the U.S., because if it does, it will slowly break a kind of balance” (Participant C of Group 11). Meanwhile,

many other participants can also make the same judgment with no reference to this interpersonal relation belief at all. Our interviews indicate the underlying logic they subscribe to is “how to unite whatever force, in the international community to combat against the Western adversarial powers that intent to contain China”, which jumps out of the immediate context of Russia-Ukraine war itself. Their dissatisfaction with the Western adversarial powers is clear, as one participant put it: “I kind of dislike how the U.S. and Europe only care about keeping control of the world order for their own power” (Participant A of Group 6).

It in essence reflects the concern for China’s own interests against the alleged containment. The role of Ukraine in relation to China-West-containment is less important than that played by Russia (not only as friend of China, but also the enemy of the Western adversarial powers that intent to contain China). This was reinforced by China Data Lab’s survey results<sup>[36]</sup> that 61.3% Chinese respondents favoured the statement that “The core of China’s diplomatic strategy is to break through the containment of China by Western countries led by the United States”. Indeed, influenced by the ideological confrontations as the legacy of the Cold War, many Chinese including those renowned experts tend to believe that there are always forces in the West persistently seeking to contain China’s development. This idea, which may have long lingered as a vague awareness since China’s opening-up in late 1970s, was gradually substantiated and magnified by a series of incidents including the bombing of China’s embassy in former Yugoslavia, U.S.-China plane collision and South China Sea naval standoffs that also fuelled China’s domestic nationalism in the past three decades. Given the fact the West and especially the U.S. explicitly identify China as “the most important strategic competitor” in their official stance recent years (e.g. National Security Strategy issued on December 2017 under the Trump administration defined China as one of the foreign competitors that “challenge American power, influence and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity”<sup>[39]</sup>; the 2022 National Defense Strategy issued under the Biden administration defined China as “the most consequential strategic competitor for the coming decades” with which U.S. deterrence needs to be “sustain[ed] and strengthen[ed]”<sup>[40]</sup>), more and more people in China are convinced of such West-led long-term containment and regard Russia as a pivotal strategic partner to counter West’s containment against China (This “strategic partner” role was reinforced by their view of Russia as China’s supplier with substantial oil and natural gas, with which almost half of these who dislike Ukraine’s collusion with the West in this study agree). For this study, in the eyes of those who dislike the Ukraine-West collusion, supporting Russia on as many occasions as possible (including this war) to counter the West is far more important than figuring out whether Ukraine is a foe or not. Moreover, the dislike of Ukraine’s collusion with the West against Russia is much less detrimental in their eyes than that, for instance, of Japan’s alliance with the West against China strategically. This echoes a recent opinion-poll finding from the Genron NPO<sup>[41]</sup> which points out that Chinese sentiment towards Japan has worsened “in an extensive fashion” with an increase in the percentage of Chinese respondents who view stronger Japan-U.S. relations as threats.

**Table 5.** The attitude towards the stance backing Russia in the war for its energy supply to China moderates the relationship between the approval of “treating the friend of enemy also as enemy” and the endorsement of Russia due to the dislike of Ukraine’s collusion with the Western adversarial powers.

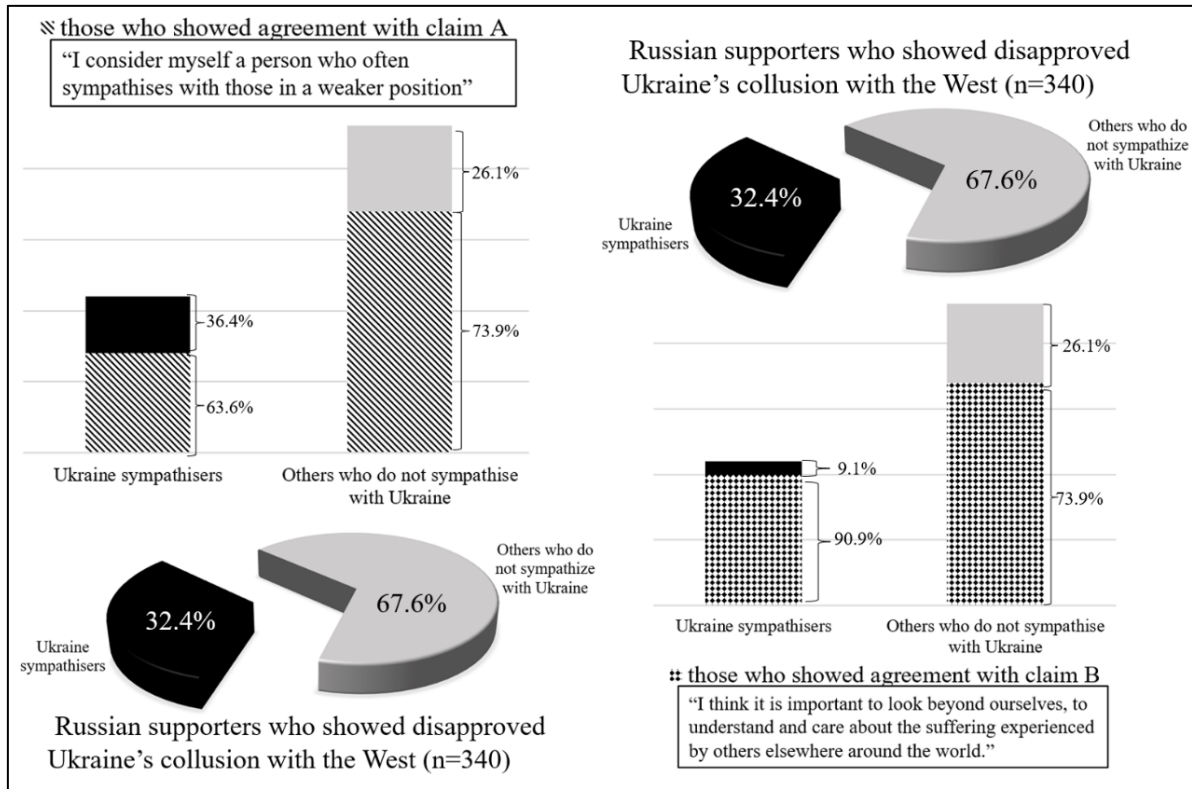
		Association (r) between “the approval of treating the friend of enemy also as enemy” and “the endorsement of Russia due to the dislike of Ukraine’s collusion with the Western adversarial powers”
1	Those who approve the claim that “I support Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war, as Russia supplies China with substantial amounts of oil and natural gas” (n=243)	-.449*
2	Those who disapprove the claim that “I support Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war, as Russia supplies China with substantial amounts of oil and natural gas” (n=310)	.113

\* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed)

Moreover, the association between the approval of the balance rule “the friend of my enemy is also my enemy” and endorsement of Russia due to the dislike of Ukraine’s collusion with Western adversarial powers varies across subgroups defined by energy-based framing. Among respondents who approve the claim that Russia should be supported because it supplies China with oil and natural gas, a significant negative correlation emerges between threat-oriented friend–foe belief and the Ukraine-collusion justification ( $r = -.449$ ,  $p = .028$ ; see **Table 5**). In contrast, no significant association is observed among those who disapprove the energy-based rationale. This pattern suggests that, for respondents who prioritise strategic energy considerations, stronger endorsement of threat-based relational alignment is associated with a reduced tendency to frame support for Russia in terms of opposition to Ukraine’s Western alignment. In other words, when strategic-interest reasoning is salient, threat-oriented friend–foe schemas may be directed towards consolidating in-group alignment rather than amplifying anti-Ukraine hostility. That means they are prone to embracing Russia as one of “us” with reference to their “us-versus-them” mindset, allowing them to believe “offering Russia support” on many occasions (including this war) becomes a logical corollary. In this way, the more importance they attach to this reason, the less significant other considerations seem. That is exactly why they regard the Ukraine factor as trivial and become reluctant to attribute their support for Russia to Ukraine’s collusion with the Western adversarial powers (despite they can infer Ukraine as “them” according to that logic).

#### **4.3. Is hostility towards the friend of my enemy always transferred? When and why does it weaken?**

It is always assumed that negative judgements and negative feelings such as hostility could be spilled over to anyone associated with the enemy, especially the friend of the enemy. Unsurprisingly, none of those Russian supporters who showed disapproved Ukraine’s collusion with the West ( $n=340$ ) agreed that “Russia has taken advantage of its strength to bully the weaker Ukraine”. In the follow-up interview, some explained that “despite an unequal position, Ukraine later has been equipped by the Western powers with the most advanced military equipment and become no weaker than Russia” (e.g. Participant A of Group 3). However, it is worth noting that nearly one third (i.e. 32.4%) of them ticked the box that “I support Ukraine in this war because the Ukrainian people have suffered greatly from the war on their land and deserve sympathy” (See **Figure 1** for a detailed description of their personal beliefs about what deserves sympathy). Their attitudes towards both sides seemed contradictory in the sense that they supported Russia and Ukraine at the same time (“I feel like both Russia and Ukraine kind of have their own reasons”, Participant C of Group 1). But as explained in the follow-up interviews such support for Ukraine from some participants was emphasised as a “moral” one. For example, “The Ukraine people deserve sympathies, but it’s just that, like, from an emotional point of view, you kind of feel really sorry for them.” (Participant B of Group 12).



**Figure 1.** Personal beliefs about what deserves sympathy: **(a)** Percentage of those who showed agreement with the claim A; **(b)** Percentage of those who showed agreement with the claim B.

**Table 6.** The attitude towards Russia as Longstanding-good-friend moderates the relationship between “personal sympathy for the weak” and “the dislike of Ukraine’s collusion with the West” as well as the relationship between “opposition to bullying the weak” and “the dislike of Ukraine’s collusion with the West”.

		Association (r) between “personal sympathy for the weak” and “the dislike of Ukraine’s collusion with the West”	Association (r) between “opposition to bullying the weak” and “the dislike of Ukraine’s collusion with the West”
1	Those who support Russia in the war due to their positive attitude towards Russia as a “true friend” (n=221) (i.e. Those who approve the claim that “I support Russia in the war, as Russia is a longstanding good friend of China”)	.145	.128
2	Those who disapprove the claim that “I support Russia in the war, as Russia is a longstanding good friend of China” (n=385)	-.335*	-.320*

\* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed)

Moreover, the association between moral-empathic dispositions and the endorsement of Russia based on the claim of Ukraine’s collusion with Western adversarial powers varies across subgroups defined by attitudes towards the “longstanding good friend” rationale. Among respondents who do not support Russia on the grounds that it is a longstanding good friend of China, personal sympathy for the weak is negatively associated with endorsement of the Ukraine-collusion justification ( $r = -.335$ ,  $p < .05$ ; see **Table 6**). Similarly, opposition to the strong bullying the weak is also negatively correlated with this justification ( $r = -$

.320,  $p < .05$ ; see **Table 6**). By contrast, no significant associations are observed among respondents who support Russia primarily because it is perceived as a longstanding good friend. This pattern suggests that moral-empathic orientations may constrain adversarial framing only among respondents whose support for Russia is not primarily grounded in affective loyalty.

## 5. Conclusion

In the so-called “post-truth” era, examining how personal beliefs and emotions shape individual judgments about international affairs has become increasingly relevant. Rather than addressing aggregate public opinion or policy outcomes, this study focuses on the cognitive mechanisms through which evaluative stances may be formed. Core cognitive elements underlying such judgments can be acquired from trusted information sources or analogically transferred from pre-existing relational schemas. To explore the latter process, this research investigates whether and to what extent analogical reasoning between interpersonal relational beliefs and geopolitical evaluations can be observed within a cohort of Beijing-based Generation Z respondents in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war.

It is theoretically plausible that individuals may extend relational rules used in interpersonal contexts to the interpretation of international affairs. The findings from this study provide exploratory evidence consistent with this possibility. Some respondents who endorse the balance rule “the friend of my enemy is also my enemy” tend to justify their support for Russia by referring to Ukraine’s alignment with Western adversarial powers. At the same time, similar pro-Russia evaluations are also observed among participants who do not strongly endorse such relational beliefs but value the vital role played by Russia against the alleged containment from the Western adversarial powers, suggesting that analogical transfer is neither universal nor necessary for arriving at this stance. These patterns indicate that analogical transfer operates as one potential cognitive pathway through which geopolitical judgments may be structured, rather than as a deterministic driver of conflict perceptions. In this sense, the findings offer partial support for Hypothesis 2 by demonstrating that interpersonal friend–foe logics are associated with, but do not exclusively determine, international evaluative positions within this Beijing-based Generation Z cohort.

Further analyses reveal that support for Russia framed in terms of energy security is positively associated with threat-oriented friend–foe beliefs. This suggests that even ostensibly strategic justifications may, for some respondents, be cognitively linked to relational alignment heuristics. However, the strength and direction of these associations vary across subgroups. Among respondents who primarily perceive Russia as a longstanding good friend, affective attachment appears to play a more central role, whereas the association between threat-based relational beliefs and specific justificatory frames becomes weaker or non-significant. This pattern provides partial support for Hypothesis 1, insofar as affective loyalty tendencies are positively related to overall pro-Russia stance. At the same time, the explanatory power remains modest, indicating that such loyalty constitutes one contributory mechanism rather than an overriding principle.

Moreover, within subgroups defined by different justificatory frames, distinct conditional patterns emerge. For instance, among respondents who emphasise Russia’s role as an energy supplier, stronger endorsement of threat-based friend–foe logic is negatively associated with attributing support to opposition against Ukraine–Western collusion. This suggests that relational alignment may, in some contexts, be directed towards consolidating perceived in-group affiliation rather than intensifying hostility towards an out-group. Finally, moral-empathic dispositions—such as sympathy for the weak—are negatively associated with adversarial justifications among respondents who do not frame Russia primarily as a longstanding good friend. This indicates that empathic considerations may coexist with, and in certain contexts constrain, adversarial relational schemas.

The study does not directly observe cognitive processing in experimental settings, nor does it establish causal pathways in a strict sense. Rather, it identifies patterned associations between interpersonal relational beliefs and geopolitical evaluations that are consistent with the operation of analogical transfer. In this sense, the findings should be understood as exploratory and mechanism-indicative rather than as definitive proof of a unified cognitive framework. Taken together, these findings highlight how analogical transfer, affective loyalty, strategic reasoning, and empathic considerations may interact in shaping geopolitical interpretations within this specific cohort. Rather than offering population-level claims, this study provides an analytically bounded examination of cognitive mechanisms observable among Beijing-based Generation Z respondents. Future research drawing on more diverse regional, generational, and socio-economic samples would be necessary to assess the broader applicability and stability of these patterns across different segments of Chinese society.

## **Author contributions**

The author contributed fully to this work, including formulating the RQs, preparing the questions, conducting the surveys and interviews, data analysis, as well as writing-up and revisions.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

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