



CHINA'S ROLE IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

March Report

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INTRODUCTION

On the 24th of February 2022, the Russian Federation began the military invasion of Ukraine after recognizing and assuring the security of the people republics of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions in the east of Ukraine. The following images of Russian troops invading the country combined with Putin's political rhetoric on removing the 'neo-Nazis' in Kyiv and the acute need to bring order and de-nazify the country have been a shock to Europe and the international system. The ongoing conflict is the latest manifestation of Russia's increasingly

revisionist ambitions towards the current American-led international order, an order that academic scholars increasingly argue is under threat by both revisionist and emerging powers. One of which is the People's Republic of China, a state that not only historically has enjoyed strong political ties with Russia, but also possesses territorial ambitions that parallel the current situation in Ukraine. An observation that is increasingly made by western media and academics has been drawing the parallel towards China's calculated nature as a selectively revisionist state but its ongoing territorial disputes in the region of the South China Sea has been the subject of increasing attention. Specifically, the People's Republic of China's tenuous relationship with Taiwan is perceived to be the next area of confrontation and revisionist efforts toward the rules-based international order. This observation has only been strengthened as the Beijing has failed to take a clear position towards the conflict, intentionally leaving its position ambiguous: the absence of recognizing the conflict in Ukraine as an aggressive war led by Russia in combination with recently abstaining on a vote condemning the conflict in the United Nations has only served to fuel fears and heighten tensions.

To that extent, this report seeks to determine and understand the plan and potential policy direction that Beijing may pursue while examining the restrictions and considerations that may dictate its future decisions. China's position and role as one of the largest economies in the global market and in proximity to vital economic routes and sea lanes of communication ensure that any conflict in the region would have wide-ranging and damaging implications and consequences. Concretely, the objective of this article is to examine and determine the manner and impact in which the Russo-Ukrainian war will have on Chinese foreign policy and what limitations and opportunities do the regime

face in either constructively engaging in advocating for a de-escalation of the violence or utilizing the conflict as a road map for its ambitions. The report systematically examines the economic and political incentives and relations China possesses with both the Ukraine and Russia before examining parallels between Taiwan and Ukraine and determining if China possesses the capabilities and political motivation to become a mediator to bring about an end to the conflict.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, China has enjoyed exponential economic growth that has seen it become one of the largest economies in the world. To that extent, Beijing has historically prioritized the state's economic growth and as an extension of that of the stability of the broader global economy. Chinese economic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the development of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), have been the products of policies that have sought to ensure global economic stability and can be seen as a manifestation of Beijing's prioritization of which. Furthermore, An examination of China's status in the global economy demonstrates how a revisionist approach to the international system would be detrimental to its own development. Chinese economic reform in the 1980s and the subsequent opening of the state towards foreign investment and the de-collectivization of the agricultural industry have enabled China to experience the exponential economic growth in the global economy in no small part due to institutions such embedded in the Bretton Woods system as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and later, in the early 2000s, the World Trade Organization (Zhao, 2018, p. 646). However, this growth has been placed in a precarious position by the current crisis with Beijing's prioritization of economic stability and orientation of foreign policy.

Beijing and Moscow have historically enjoyed a close partnership in both the military and political sense — as similarly “emerging” powers in the international system. However, it is crucial to note that this partnership has been a calculated one, that has now however proved to have placed the regime in an uncomfortable position to balance and be measured in its decisions and the political rhetoric of its leaders and officials. The Beijing-Moscow relationship, a 99-paragraph long article published in February as part of a joint statement that addresses issues concerning defense and political cooperation has become the instrument that now threatens Beijing's pursuit of economic growth and global economic stability. The document includes “shared positions on several global and regional issues” that China and Russia are orienting towards is reflective of a commitment to one another (Rajagopalan, 2022, The Diplomat). However, this is not the issue that has facilitated the conflict of interest that China is faced with — that is in the choice between Europe and Russia as economic partners. The financial sanctions imposed on Russia by Western states have highlighted to China the acute danger that associating too strongly with Russia will have on their economy. Whereas China still relies on Russian oil and gas imports to fuel and help power its economy, placing it in an uncomfortable position.

To this extent, in a recently measured and calculated statement published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, the ministry presented what it calls “China's Five-Point Position on the Current Ukraine Issue”, intending to clarify its stance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). These five points are reflective of China’s approach to and pursuit of facilitating global governance and the sovereignty guarantees embedded in the UN Charter. The first point makes clear that China will continue to stand by its understanding of a policy of respecting and ensuring the sovereignty rules as enshrined in the UN charter. The second recognizes that the current confrontational environment in the international system is reflective of the cold-war era and that this needs to change for collective international security. While asserting that Russia, in the face of NATO’s expansion towards Eastern Europe, has fostered “legitimate security demands [that] ought to be taken seriously and properly addressed” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). The third point is a commitment to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of civilians caught in the conflict and asserting that restraint is needed in the current conflict to prevent further escalation.

The final two points indicate China’s will that the conflict is resolved through diplomatic engagement by the two belligerent states and that the United Nations is a forum in which it may take place. Thereby, once more manifests the calculated approach Beijing possesses towards issues concerning and aimed at facilitating and cementing the status of China in the international order. The reality that China has become “too deeply integrated into the existing order”, and has led it to a situation for the first time in years where it needs to tread carefully in order not to compromise itself economically but also in terms of stature in the international system (Can & Chan, 2020, pp. 11-12; Liu, 2021, p. 97)

CHINA VS WESTERN STRATEGY TO END THE WAR

Since the onset of the European crisis, Washington has not treated China as an afterthought. Instead, it has been actively attempting to sway Beijing away from its well-planned diplomacy.

US officials spent at least three months attempting to persuade their Chinese counterparts to assist them in preventing Russian President Vladimir Putin from invading Ukraine. And although the fight has been ongoing for nearly a week, the Americans are still eager to enlist the help of the Chinese. After all, they recognize that sanctions alone may not have enough of an impact on Russia without cooperating with the world's second-largest economy. China's Xi Jinping may be the only person who can persuade Putin to reconsider his actions and change his objectives.

Since the beginning of the conflict, it was clear that the two powerful entities have different strategies to end the war in Ukraine, and the situation tests shaky US-China relations. Xi's position and Beijing's point of view on the Russian invasion of Ukraine could define future ties with Washington. In fact, China condemns the western strategies against Russia. And at the same time, the Joe Biden administration and several top officials in the United States have discouraged China from backing Russia in its war in Ukraine.(Harb,2022)

Western alliances worry China, which is in a tricky position with the US, trying to restore its links and its friendship with Russia. Washington is not alone and is backed by Europe, Japan, and many other countries, which triggers the Chinese economy and position.

On the other hand, and since the friendship between both Russia and China is said to be "rock solid", "Beijing has refused to call Russia's attack on Ukraine an invasion" and has decided to work on promoting negotiations between Ukraine and Putin, and is against resolving issues with sanctions, still less unilateral sanctions that lack the basis of international law.

The situation looks like China is trying to support Russia subtly, without sending arms and, at the same time, working on keeping the Beijing-Europe relations stable at some point. (Cheng, 2022)

China has decided not to send anything triggering, such as military assistance, that would put sanctions on them since Biden has warned Xi of a global backlash if China helps Russia's attack on Ukraine during a two-hour call between the American and Chinese President. President Jinping declared that China is not planning to send weapons to Russia and will not support the war and brutal

campaign in Ukraine, even though Putin did ask for China's help clearly, as reported by the Pentagon.

He seemed very convinced about aligning with the Biden administration's demands and relied on global peace and security as his only concern. He affirmed not wanting the violence to accelerate in any way. Both officials declared wanting to collaborate for world peace and that "peace and security are what the international community should treasure most." (Shinkmann, 2022)

Beijing's position was tricky at the time because Russia had specifically requested weapons from China's government which thought that a cease-fire was what was needed at this time. But Xi has already considered sending military aid to his allies. According to Susan Thornton, a career diplomat with deep experience in Russia and China, and the former assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs for the Trump administration, tells U.S. News, Xi cannot turn around and be seen shipping weapons to Russia, after his clear statements. (Shinkmann, 2022)

PARALLELS BETWEEN UKRAINE AND TAIWAN

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, many have drawn parallels between Ukraine and Taiwan – both are Western-facing democracies under threat from a powerful autocratic neighbor. Beijing has long maintained the self-governing island of Taiwan is part of its territory, and "reunification" — by force if necessary — is a crucial priority for President Xi.

As Moscow amassed troops in border regions over the past few months, Beijing has flown a record number of fighter jets over Taiwan's air defense identification zone. After the Russian invasion, Chinese netizens began drawing parallels with Taiwan. To that extent, netizens believe that since Russia was able to invade Ukraine so easily, Beijing could also use force against Taiwan. In fact, they seem so sure to be able to take over Taiwan. They affirmed that if China decides to attack Taiwan in the morning, China will achieve victory in the afternoon, and China's national flag will fly over Taiwan the next day (CSIS, 2022).

Another argument is that Chinese propaganda units leverage the Ukraine conflict to disseminate false information to Taiwan. And the continuous message here is that the US did not come to Ukraine's support militarily, and will not come to Taiwan's defense. As a result, by implication, the message is that the people of Taiwan should deal with Beijing now rather than risk being abandoned. There was also another piece of misinformation worth noting. It was included in China's offer to evacuate Taiwanese citizens from Ukraine, despite their government's refusal to do so.

In addition to that, China told its citizens in Ukraine to simply remain put early on in the conflict. Therefore, China will study this war closely, and there will be diplomatic, economic, and other military aspects they will study.

CHINA AS THE POTENTIAL PEACEMAKER BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

Since the first phases of the conflict, several observers have considered Beijing the ideal mediator between Ukraine and Russia. Indeed, beyond the two parties directly involved in the war, the United States, NATO, and the European Union have recognized China as the potential peacemaker of the dispute, especially considering its leverage over Russia and Xi's capacity to persuade Moscow. Nevertheless, as the war drags on, China's possibilities to act as a mediator are slowly fading away. Instead of adopting political neutrality, China's stance on the Ukraine crisis has turned out to be vague and contentious so far.



The Dove of Peace, a symbol of peace and solidarity. By: Wilfried Pohnke / Pixabay, 2022

Initially, President Xi Jinping had shown his willingness to step in as a force for peace and stability. On February 25th, 2022, in a phone call with President Putin, Xi Jinping exhorted him to settle the dispute with Ukraine by negotiation, in compliance with the principles of non-interference, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity of all countries (Lau, 2022). Furthermore, Beijing has repeatedly assured both Western leaders and Ukraine President Zelensky of his interest in stopping the war through dialogue and negotiations (White, 2022). In this regard, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, reported Xi's main objectives in Ukraine, namely gathering all the involved parties to achieve a

ceasefire through dialogue and negotiations and preventing the worsening of a humanitarian crisis on the ground (CGTN, 2022).

Nevertheless, China's lasting reluctance to get involved in the substantive resolution of the crisis as a broker has further undermined the relationship between China and the West. By way of illustration, during the China-EU Summit, on April 1st, 2022, the EU leaders focused most of the discussion on the events in Ukraine and the responsibility of both Beijing and the EU to end the conflict. On that occasion, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, stated, "Key international norms and principles must be respected. We count on China's support to achieve a lasting ceasefire, to stop the unjustifiable war and address the dramatic humanitarian crisis it has generated" (European Commission, 2022). China hoped to stick to the previous-war program, such as climate change and bilateral cooperation, refraining from criticizing Russia's offensive.

Furthermore, the growing Beijing-Russia "ironclad" friendship is likely to further compromise the strategic axis between China and the West to resolve the conflict, making Xi Jinping's role as a peacemaker more questionable and less credible. Even if China has not publicly supported Russia's invasion, it has strongly supported Moscow's complaints about NATO expansion, accusing the US-led NATO of forcing Russia and Ukraine's tensions to a "breaking point" (Reuters, 2022). Indeed, China's political and economic ties with Russia advance together with the shared threat they perceive from the United States and the West, especially in terms of ideological confrontation between the two most powerful autocratic countries and the liberal democracies (Aboudouh, 2022).

China's criticism of Western strategies has also involved the question of economic sanctions. In a video speech delivered to the annual Boao Forum for Asia on April 20th, 2022, President Xi Jinping has rejected the imposition of sanctions to achieve global security, stating: "We should uphold the principle of indivisibility of security, build a balanced, effective, and sustainable security architecture, and oppose the building of national security based on insecurity in other countries" (Reuters, 2022). While President Biden has recently reiterated the threat of sanctions should China decide to back Russia's efforts in Ukraine, President Xi has repeatedly asserted that he will not allow the US to adopt coercive measures that would harm China's national interests.

CONCLUSION

China's reluctance to get involved in the substantive resolution of the Russia-Ukraine war has clearly shown the conflict of interests it has been facing throughout the competition and its strategic interest and calculated approach towards the international system-related issues.

On the one hand, the strong relations between China and Russia, as well as the growing threat that China perceives from the United States and its Western allies, have prevented Beijing from strongly condemning Moscow's actions in Ukraine. In this regard, a fast and easy Russian victory on the battlefield would have somehow benefited China in many ways. First, Russian military victory could lead to a lasting state of insecurity in Europe, diverting Western attention from national and international China issues. Secondly, a swift Russian success would have led those small countries that rely upon the United States' security umbrella to feel less safe, increasing the possibility for China and Russia to represent valid alternatives.

On the other hand, China's miscalculation of the Russian offensive, especially in terms of costs and duration, has made Russia's backing of China less convenient and riskier for President Xi Jinping, especially if that would drag Beijing into the spiral of sanctions, causing the downturn in China's economy.

Some observers have assumed that China's clear stance on the war will be determined by the events on the battlefield, to take advantage of the conflict to maximize its national interests. Nevertheless, as the Ukraine conflict deepens, China's neutral policy becomes less feasible to the international community and riskier for its international reputation. Unless China and the West adopt a common strategy to resolve the war, tensions are expected to rise

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