



WHY CHINA STAYS ON THE SIDELINES WHILE RUSSIA INVADES UKRAINE

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Since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine, China has largely stayed on the sidelines while the international community is calling Beijing to take a position in the conflict. As known, there has been a lot of speculation on how China will respond to this war since the conflict itself could usher in a new era of geopolitics. For the moment, there are a few thoughts from China that we know for sure: in the first place, China condemns that the territorial sovereignty of all countries, including in the case of Ukraine, should be respected. Secondly, China's affirmed that Russia's security concerns about NATO's eastward expansion, are legitimate and asks to both sides to "give up their Cold War mentality". Finally, China's view of this conflict states that both sides should exercise restraint to prevent a large-scale humanitarian crisis. China is now calling upon the crucial role of the *UN Security Council* in resolving the ongoing issue.



In the 21st century, even if it will be extremely hard because it is known to fall into a *middle-income* trap¹, China is committed to competing for global economic primacy with the United States. Therefore, wanting to do business, having a mantra of stability, and being a pragmatic power, are not enough. The country still needs globalization to continue fueling its economy. However, leaving behind the previously mentioned issues, China considers itself a global power in the international arena and due to this, it is increasingly called upon to step in as a mediator and to show itself to the world as a responsible power. Not having a strong position in this situation shows that China does not seem ready to take on the responsibilities that come with being a global power. It is unlikely to expose itself to an operation whose failure could undermine Xi Jinping's leadership² willing also to continue the path that exclusively serves his country's national interest. China wants to remain a "peacefully rising power" adhering to the principles of non-violence in securing a multipolar future. Currently condemning the "understandable reaction"³ of Russia against NATO's forces, China does not waste time highlighting her opposition to the US, perhaps the most significant aspect of China's position is its identification of the US-led West as the primary instigator⁴ of a long-standing problem that has led to the current crisis. Moreover, it opposes western sanctions, arguing that these penalties cause more problems than solving. In these last few months, the Chinese Foreign Minister *Wang Yi* acknowledged both

¹ an economic development situation in which a country that attains a certain income (due to given advantages) gets stuck at that level.

² Wong Brian, "*Understanding Extent (and Limits) of Chinese Public Support for Russia*", *The Diplomat - Know the Asia-Pacific*, 17 May 2022.

³ Morango Afonso, "*The role of China in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine*", *Current Affairs*, 9 March 2022, Brussels.

⁴ Xi Jinping three weeks ago also railed against U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to self-governing Taiwan, which China claims as its own, and said the United States was trying to apply the same tactics in Ukraine and Taiwan to "revive a Cold War mentality, contain China and Russia, and provoke major power rivalry and confrontation". (<https://www.reuters.com/world/china-calls-us-main-instigator-ukraine-crisis-2022-08-10/>)



countries' history and relationship and encourages peaceful settlement and diplomacy approach in Ukraine.

For China, the Russian war against Ukraine is primarily a proxy war between Russia and the *US-led* NATO, confirming their idea that the US is continuously advancing its hegemony at the expense of others, and primarily at the expense of the People's Republic. Russia and China's diplomatic and political relationship dates back to nearly a decade of cooperation in international politics, economy, and media. Recently they have also signed a deepening partnership against the *West* that both leaders characterized as a "no-limits" friendship⁵. However, is China doing the right thing by trying to maintain a neutral position in this war? The academic world is extremely divided in answering this question. Most respondents stated that China's best course of action is to "offer moral support to Russia" to maintain their friendship even if China needs to pay attention to not supporting Vladimir Putin's separatist agenda for Eastern Ukraine to not contradict the Chinese policies unification of Taiwan. However, this stands in stark juxtaposition against the ones who support China's arming of Russia. Others suggest that China should condemn Russia's invasion; some state that China should arm Ukraine and finally the remaining part call for China as a negotiator to end the conflict. Following China's moves, despite the "friendly" relationship between Putin and Xi Jinping, the CCP will not be particularly keen on a *full-on-war* in Europe also because the Asian nations, including China, have many trade links with Ukraine, mostly via the *Belt and Road Initiative* that would be damaged.

China has attempted to portray its position on the conflict in terms of objectivity, neutrality, and independence. The past three months, however, show that China is following the first response to

⁵ Standish Reid, "Ukraine War A New Test For Chinese Power Across Eurasia", China in Eurasia - RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 1 May 2022.



the previous question and in effect slanted towards⁶ Russia while appearing to stand on the middle ground. Furthermore, the war is not in line with China's interests. The global food crisis and economic problems will pose a serious threat to the Chinese economy. Another reason for China's "low efforts" in the conflict is that, while the US and the EU are first and foremost focused on the Ukraine War, China's focus remains on its relationship with Russia to expand its diplomatic relations in the *Indo-Pacific* directing its attention to the *BRI*. Indeed, the connectivity plans in Europe have stalled by the war, so today, Beijing is rethinking its major geoeconomics vehicles, and the corridors with Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey will likely become increasingly central⁷. The Russian invasion has also found Russia and China in a fragile position in Central Asia leaving the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (SCO) - multilateral security and economic bloc helmed by China which includes India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as members - in an awkward position, and since China seems not taking a concrete position in the conflict, has called on the SCO to play an active role in the resolution processes. However, even if China hoped to receive the organization's help, the efforts made by the SCO received little perception outside of the Chinese circles mostly because the war in Ukraine is not in line with their main aims which are in the fields of security, counterterrorism, and illicit drug trafficking. China's footprint in *Eurasia* and the future of the SCO are just one example of repercussions from the war that could hinder wider Chinese goals.

The story of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is still to be written. For now, though, it is reasonable to argue that the proxy war narrative with a surge of disinformation, is also pushing ahead with a new

⁶ This could also be seen in the latest BRICS Summit.

<https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/decoding-china-stance-on-russia-ukraine-conflict/article65510759.ece>

⁷ Standish Reid, "China's Messaging on the Ukraine War Es Evolving, but in Which Way?", China in Eurasia - RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 3 May 2022.



model of international relations that includes rewriting the definition of democracy. China is not ready to wholeheartedly support Russia and the possibility to have a future invasion of Taiwan from the West seems to have a cost that is not worth facing today. Ultimately, for Beijing, a *China-led international order* aims to structure the world to make it safer for China which would mean containing increasingly illiberal elements and fewer freedoms.

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