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ANALYSIS

Chinese Perspectives on China–Russia Relations since 24 February 2022[1]

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Abstract

This article provides a review of Chinese official discourse, expert debates, and media narratives on China's relationship with Russia since February 24, 2022. It suggests that it remains an open question whether China's relationship with Russia will develop as one determined by China–US relations or as a genuine endogenous relationship.

From late 2021 to February 24, 2022, Russian military maneuvers in the area around the Ukrainian border sparked intensive discussion and debate in China, both within the expert community and among the general public, with a focus on what to make of Russia's true intentions and possible plan for Ukraine. Although a lot of Chinese experts and Russia-watchers expected that Russia might send troops into the two self-proclaimed independent republics in eastern Ukraine or replicate the operation conducted in South Ossetia in 2008, very few predicted the full-scale attack that began on February 24.

Since the war broke out, the Chinese state has, generally speaking, maintained a consistent set of policy stances and narratives. It has tried to walk a fine line between the two sides by making vague statements about the need to uphold the UN principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, while respecting all parties' legitimate security concerns. Official media have been discouraged from using terms such as "war" and "invasion" to describe the Russian action in Ukraine; early on, the term "Russian–Ukrainian conflict" was preferred, while more recently the situation has often been described as the "Ukrainian crisis." Meanwhile, the Chinese state has consistently framed the US and NATO's eastward expansion as the root cause of the war. The Chinese state has also declined to mediate between the warring parties directly, emphasizing that China is not a party to the conflict and "whoever started the trouble should end it." More recently, Chinese official sources have expressed the view that "the Ukraine crisis is not what we want to see;" and have increasingly emphasized "promoting dialogue for peace" as China's basic position.

In the analysis of some Chinese specialists, China's position on the Russian–Ukrainian conflict is not actually "neutral," because neutrality requires taking no position regardless of the behavior of either party to a conflict. In fact, China has not recognized the independence of Crimea, Luhansk or Donetsk and still openly advocates the preservation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Moreover, China's voting record on all UN resolutions related to the Russia–Ukraine conflict suggests that the country votes on an issue-by-issue basis (Zhao 2022).

On the one-year anniversary of the Russia attack, the Chinese state somewhat unexpectedly issued a document entitled "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis" (Government of China 2023). In addition to reiterating several key stances, the position paper outlines a number of major policy areas as either implicit red lines or key areas for follow-up work, including outlining a clear message cautioning against the worst-case escalation scenario: use of nuclear weapons. Due to its lack of a concrete "road map" or "timetable," the document cannot be called a peace plan in a strict sense. However, it demonstrates Beijing's increasing political ambition to show the world it has put something on the table.

Since the 20th Communist Party Congress and the recent Two Sessions (annual legislative meetings) in early March 2023, the Chinese leadership seems more prepared to play a significant role on the international stage, partly building on the momentum gained during the Chinese government's highly unexpected—and successful—mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023. In the Iran–Saudi case, China, which has historically worked from the sidelines, managed to work out a deal, and was willing for its role in the process to be known publicly. Even though it would be very difficult to replicate this in a possible mediation between Russia and Ukraine, if China could claim to have had any role in a future "resumption of peace talks" or some form of a limited ceasefire, it would be a tremendous victory for Chinese diplomacy. No matter how one evaluates China's engagement and the outcome of Xi's trip to Moscow on March 20–22, Beijing appears to be reserving a central spot at the table in any future political process aimed at ending the war in Ukraine and undertaking

1 This article was prepared immediately prior to Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow on 20–22 March 2023.

post-conflict reconstruction—or even post-war reforms of the international order.

Meanwhile, within Chinese society, an array of opinions, encompassing different segments of the political spectrum, have been expressed on the nature of the war and political crisis, as well as on how China and the world should respond. Online debates on social media, as well as debates within the expert community, have been quite heated and sharply divided. Such debates explore a series of fundamental questions about how the world should be organized, focusing, among other topics, on: the justifications for war and violence; the contemporary manifestations and relevance of fascism, imperialism, and colonialism; the tension between national sovereignty and national self-determination; the crisis of the liberal international order and the possible shift to multipolarity; the role of historical justice and popular sovereignty in international law; the policy implications for personal and national ontological security. For some Chinese, such debates constitute a soul-searching process that has led them to ask not only "who are our enemies? who are our friends?", but also "who are we?"

At the official level, in the year following 24 February 2022, overall economic ties between Russia and China appear to have grown. The target set by the two sides of an annual trade volume of US$200 billion, regarded as a very challenging task by many commentators, will likely be reached earlier than planned. Prior trade and financial ties and other forms of collaboration between the two countries have continued unaffected by the war. Chinese businesses also increased their market share in some sectors of the Russian economy as Western capital left Russia. Furthermore, the two countries continue to conduct joint military exercises.

On the Russian side, during the early stages of war in Ukraine, a consensus was seemingly reached that the war will inevitably increase Russia's dependence on China. The economic data bear this out. A couple of years ago, there was hope among many Russian officials and experts that Russia should and could act as a "balancer" between the United States and China, taking on the position historically held by China in the US–Soviet Union–China Cold War Big Triangle (TASS 2020). But this discussion of Russia's so-called "pragmatic neutrality" between the US and China that had begun in 2018 during the U.S.–China trade war had, by early 2022, shifted to a similar discussion about China's "strategic neutrality" between Ukraine (and the "Collective West") and Russia. In this context, leading China experts in Russia do not hide their perception that China and Russia have a shared interest in countering U.S. hegemony, and that such common security is the guarantor of stability within the China–Russia relationship (*Novaya Gazeta* 2022).

As the war progressed during the spring and summer of 2022, the Russian leadership and key opinion leaders increasingly came to present the military campaign in Ukraine as an anti-imperialist war. This framing allowed them to portray Russia as the leader of a global resistance movement against Western hegemony. It paints the war as the harbinger of a genuine multipolar world—albeit in a dramatic, even brutal way. The Russian state also intends to present such a framing to its Chinese counterparts. Recently, the Russian side has specifically sought to draw an analogy between the security concerns facing Russia in Europe and the Eurasian region to those China faces in the Asia-Pacific region. Such efforts resonate well with those within China who perceive the "NATO-ization of Asia-Pacific" and the "Asia-Pacification of NATO" as a real threat. This position has been growing rapidly within China in recent years as the U.S. government has openly admitted that it seeks to contain and encircle China, including in the economic sphere, and has redoubled its efforts to form new security and intelligence blocs (AUKUS, QUAD, etc.), with China as the clear threat they are focused on countering. As a result, there is real concern within China that the negative security spiral and risk escalation that has been unfolding for more than two decades between Russia and the US/NATO in Europe may be replicated in the Asia-Pacific. Within Chinese society, while there are very divergent assessments of Russia's military actions in Ukraine, one particular strand enjoys strong support, the view that: while we don't necessarily agree with the Russian state's justifications for the war, we would not want to see Russia lose because "if Russia is crushed, we (China) will be left alone against the US" or "the West will come for China after it decapitates Russia; the only way to survive is by standing with Russia now." Certain elements of the Position Paper suggest that China is sending a message primarily to the US, namely that "in terms of security perceptions and security concerns, we are in a similar situation to Russia. So don't push us further." The success or failure of Russia's efforts to convince China of the essential similarity between the Russia–NATO conflict in Europe and the China–U.S. one in Asia-Pacific will have a significant impact on the future of the bilateral relationship.

On a related note, the Chinese and Russian states seem to have recently engaged in some tacit coordination, constructing shared meanings and knowledge by offering new concepts as shared discourses. For example, the Russian state has intensified its use of the term "the collective West" since 2021 (Comai 2023). While there is no direct equivalent of "the collective West" in Chinese discourse, a similar concept has recently gained popularity within official narratives: *Meixifang* (US and the west). (For a representative voice on *Meixifang* by

a researcher at a key foreign affairs think tank in China, see Shen 2022). Shared discursive constructions can also be seen in such key documents as China's recently released Global Security Initiative, which adopts the idea of "indivisible security," a key concept long advocated by Russia, albeit putting China's own spin on it.

On the flip side, whereas the war seems to have provided a strong impetus for Western unity, "the Rest" differs sharply in its reaction to the invasion. Much of the Global South or the non-Western world has adopted a relatively passive attitude toward the Russian invasion. China's position is in some ways similar to such reactions. Meanwhile, both Russia and China are actively reaching out to the Global South. Such efforts include Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's recent visits to Africa, the holding of a Russia–Africa summit in Russia, China's successful mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the clear emphasis on non-Western countries and regions in China's Global Security Initiative.

It remains to be seen whether China is willing to approach its relationship with Russia as one predominantly dictated by its perception of US–China relations, or rather build it on genuine endogenous relations between the two countries; and whether Russia will be successful in convincing China of the structural similarity between the two countries when it comes to security. Such mutual perceptions and altercasting efforts will influence not only the future trajectory of Sino–Russian relations, but also the international order as a whole.

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