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China Asked Russia to Delay Ukraine War Until After Olympics, U.S. Officials Say

A Western intelligence report indicates that Chinese officials had some level of direct knowledge about President Vladimir V. Putin's war plans or intentions.

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President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, left, and President Xi Jinping of China meeting last month on the day of the Olympics opening ceremony in Beijing. Sputnik, via Reuters



By **Edward Wong** and **Julian E. Barnes**

March 2, 2022

WASHINGTON — A Western intelligence report said senior Chinese officials told senior Russian officials in early February not to [invade Ukraine](#) before the end of the [Winter Olympics](#) in Beijing,

according to senior Biden administration officials and a European official.

The report indicates that senior Chinese officials had some level of direct knowledge about Russia's war plans or intentions before the invasion started last week. [President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia met with](#) President Xi Jinping of China in Beijing on Feb. 4 before the opening ceremony of the Olympics. Moscow and Beijing issued a 5,000-word statement at the time declaring that their partnership had "no limits," denouncing NATO enlargement and asserting that they would establish a new global order with true "democracy."

The intelligence on the exchange between the Chinese and Russian officials was classified. It was collected by a Western intelligence service and considered credible by officials. Senior officials in the United States and allied governments passed it around as they discussed when Mr. Putin might attack Ukraine.

However, different intelligence services had varying interpretations, and it is not clear how widely the information was shared.

One official familiar with the intelligence said the material did not necessarily indicate the conversations about an invasion took place between Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin. Other officials briefed on the intelligence declined to give further details. The officials spoke about the report on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the intelligence.

Given the close nature of the relationship between Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin, senior Chinese officials are likely to have briefed Mr. Xi on any important exchanges between officials of their nations in the period around the leadership summit, analysts say.

When asked by email on Wednesday whether Chinese officials had urged Russian officials to delay an invasion of Ukraine until after the Olympics, Liu Pengyu, the Chinese Embassy spokesman in Washington, said, "These claims are speculation without any basis, and are intended to blame-shift and smear China."

China held the [closing ceremony](#) of the Olympics on Feb. 20. The next day, Mr. Putin [ordered more Russian troops](#) to enter an insurgent-controlled area of eastern Ukraine after state television broadcast a meeting between him and his national security council and, separately, a furious speech in which he said Ukraine should be a part of Russia. Early on Feb. 24, the Russian military began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including carrying out attacks on cities with ballistic missiles, artillery and tanks.

American and European officials have said they find it hard to believe it is mere coincidence that Mr. Putin's invasion did not start until right after the Olympics. In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia during the Summer Olympics in Beijing, which upset some Chinese officials.

This winter, Russia moved military units from its border with China and other parts of the east to near Ukraine and to Belarus to prepare for the invasion. The movements indicated a high level of trust between Russian and Chinese officials.

China and Russia have been [strengthening their economic, diplomatic and military ties](#) for years. Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin met 37 times as national leaders before their latest conclave in Beijing. The ambitious joint statement that the two nations issued during that meeting [alarmed American and European officials](#), especially because it was the first time China had explicitly sided with Russia on issues concerning NATO and European security. European leaders have [denounced](#) China and Russia since then.

Representative Mike Gallagher, Republican of Wisconsin and a member of the House Intelligence Committee, said he was not familiar with the intelligence on discussions between Russia and China over Ukraine, but Beijing's support of Moscow was clear.

"The Chinese support all of Putin's narrative to blame the West for provoking Russia," Mr. Gallagher said. "I see no change in the Chinese views on Russia. They remain in a de facto alliance against the West at this point."

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For months, some American officials tried to recruit China to help avert the war.

Days after President Biden spoke to Mr. Xi in a video summit on Nov. 15, senior American officials [decided to present intelligence](#) on the Russian troop buildup around Ukraine to senior Chinese officials to try to get them to persuade Mr. Putin to stand down. The Americans talked to Qin Gang, the Chinese ambassador in

Washington, and to Wang Yi, the foreign minister. In a half-dozen [meetings](#), including one in Washington between U.S. officials and the Chinese ambassador just hours before the Russian invasion, Chinese officials expressed skepticism that Mr. Putin would invade Ukraine, American officials said.

After one diplomatic exchange in December, U.S. officials received intelligence showing Beijing had shared the information with Moscow, telling the Russians that the United States was trying to sow discord and that China would not try to impede Russian plans, American officials said.

U.S. intelligence findings and assessments of Russian plans for an invasion of Ukraine have generally been accurate. The Americans began a campaign last fall to share intelligence with mainly ally and partner nations and to present declassified material to the public to build pressure on Russia to halt any planned invasion. William J. Burns, the C.I.A. director, flew to Moscow on Nov. 2 to [confront the Russians](#) with the information, and on Nov. 17, American intelligence officials [shared their findings](#) with NATO.

British officials had assessed that an attack by Mr. Putin before the Olympics was possible but unlikely, according to multiple officials briefed on London's intelligence. That was partly based on the Western intelligence report, but mostly on an analytic assessment that Russia's plan to overcome [Western sanctions](#) was highly dependent on China's support and the notion that Mr. Putin would not risk angering Mr. Xi.

British officials also assessed that the joint statement issued by Mr. Putin and Mr. Xi was a clear sign of China's support, something that Beijing would have been reluctant to give if Mr. Putin was willing to overshadow the Olympics by beginning his assault before the end of the Games, according to people familiar with the British thinking.

American intelligence officials observed Moscow making final preparations around Feb. 10, the kinds of movements that immediately precede an attack.

Russia-Ukraine War: Key Developments

Finland's NATO membership bid. Finland's leaders announced their [support for the nation to join the alliance](#), while Sweden is expected to do the same within days. The Kremlin said that [Finland's possible accession was a threat](#) and that Russia would "take necessary measures" to protect itself.



Allied intelligence services learned from intercepted communications that senior Russian commanders were being brought together for a meeting, which some Western governments believed was the key decision point for commanders to begin the attack. This intelligence was part of what led Jake Sullivan, the White House national security adviser, to warn on Feb. 11 that a Russian attack could come before the end of the Olympics. Multiple officials also said at the time that U.S. officials had picked up intelligence that Russia was considering Feb. 16 as the possible start date for the invasion. That prediction turned out to be wrong, though only by a few days.

In assessing that Russia could ignore China's widely understood desire that peace be maintained through the Olympics, intelligence agencies took into account multiple considerations. While U.S. officials acknowledged that Mr. Putin's relationship with Mr. Xi was important, they believed Russia wanted to quickly begin, and complete, an attack before the readiness of its troops declined. Mr. Putin, American officials assessed, also did not want to be seen as overly deferential to another leader.

Both U.S. and British intelligence officials also wrongly assessed that supply problems that had plagued Russian forces in Belarus during exercises had been fixed, allowing an invasion to proceed, according to a person briefed on the assessment. In reality, the supply problems have continued to hamper Russian forces as they moved into Ukraine.

Since the war began, Chinese officials have consistently [sided with Russia](#). They have expressed support for Russia's concerns about NATO and spoken of "[sovereignty](#)" in ambiguous terms. A Chinese government readout of a telephone conversation last Friday between Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin reiterated those points. Spokespeople for the Chinese Foreign Ministry have refused to call Russia's actions an "invasion" and blamed the United States for inflaming tensions around Ukraine.

China has also criticized the sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and European nations.

On Wednesday, Wang Wenbin, a Foreign Ministry spokesman, [said](#) at a news conference in Beijing that Russia and Ukraine should "seek a political solution that accommodates the legitimate security concerns of both sides."

China is trying to evacuate thousands of its citizens, including diplomats, from Ukraine. About [6,000 citizens](#) were in Ukraine

before those efforts began. At least one Chinese citizen was injured by gunfire on Tuesday while trying to leave Ukraine, Mr. Wang said.

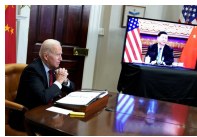
The Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, spoke with the Ukrainian foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, on Tuesday about the Chinese citizens in the country, according to an official Chinese readout.

It is not clear what assurances, if any, Russian officials gave Chinese officials about the invasion. On Feb. 24, the day the full-scale invasion began, Hua Chunying, a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, said: “We noted that today Russia announced its launch of a special military operation in eastern Ukraine. Russia’s Defense Ministry said that its armed forces will not conduct missile, air or artillery strikes on cities.” That promise turned to be false from the start.

American and European officials are watching China to see whether it will help Russia evade sanctions or salvage the [Russian economy](#). Before the invasion, Beijing and Moscow [announced a 30-year contract](#) for China to buy gas through a new pipeline. China has also [lifted restrictions](#) on the import of Russian wheat. But U.S. officials expect Chinese state-owned banks to avoid openly violating the sanctions for fear of jeopardizing their global commerce.

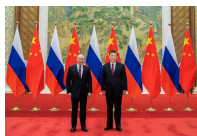
Athletes from Ukraine [narrowly escaped Russian bombs](#) to arrive in Beijing this week to compete in the Paralympic Winter Games, which open on Friday. On Thursday, the International Paralympic Committee announced that it was expelling the athletes from Russia and Belarus because of threats of boycotts from many other delegations.

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Ukrainians and the War

- President Volodymyr Zelensky makes almost daily pleas to the West for heavier artillery. [A volunteer unit of Ukrainian fighters on the front line in the east](#) illustrates how critical that weaponry is for Ukraine.
 - Before the Russian invasion, Ukraine had a vibrant ballet scene. Now, many Ukrainian dancers have fled the country, [fanning out across Europe — both for safety and to keep dancing](#).
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Russians and the War

- To Western audiences, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has unfolded as a series of brutal attacks and strategic blunders. On Russian television, [those events were spun as positive developments](#), in a jumble of opinions and falsehoods.
 - Maria V. Alyokhina, a member of the punk band and performance art group Pussy Riot, spent years in Russia fighting against the system. But as the crackdown on Russian dissidents widened during the war, she decided to flee the country. [Here is how she described her harrowing escape](#).
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Around the World

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 - Bulgaria, a country that Moscow long counted as its most ardent and reliable friend in Europe, [has joined fellow members of the European Union](#) in imposing economic sanctions on Russia, offered to repair broken equipment for Ukraine and expelled Russian diplomats.
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How We Verify Our Reporting

- The Times has deployed dozens of journalists to report on the ground in Ukraine, to cut through the fog of misinformation. [A security team watches out for them](#).
 - Our team of visual journalists analyzes satellite images, [photographs](#), videos and [radio transmissions](#) to independently confirm troop movements and other details.
 - We monitor and authenticate reports on social media, corroborating these with eyewitness accounts and interviews. [Read more about our reporting efforts](#).
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Understand What Is Going On

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- **Outside Pressures:** Governments, [sports organizations](#) and businesses are taking steps to punish Russia. Here [are some of the sanctions adopted so far](#) and [a list of companies who have pulled out of the country](#).
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