

Christian R. MANAHL – 3 May 2023

## **The Dragon and the Bear Unlimited - Should we worry about the China-Russia Relationship?**

### **No limits partnership ?**

Generally speaking, the “no limits” partnership announced on the eve of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a deeply disturbing development. The two biggest authoritarian regimes in the world are ganging up to challenge what they perceive as a Western-dominated global system, while one of them blatantly violates basic principles of the UN Charter – non-aggression, sovereign equality and territorial integrity of all member states – and threatens European security.

Clearly, the post-Cold War era has ended and we are moving towards a new bipolar confrontation between the liberal, democratic West and an authoritarian East, in a potentially more dangerous configuration than during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union and communist China were at loggerheads with each other. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine represents the biggest threat to international security since the Cold War, perhaps even since the Second World War. And China’s political backing of the aggression makes it so much harder to deal with it in a multilateral and diplomatic way, not least because both countries are members of the UN Security Council.

This being said, neither Russia’s aggression and revisionism in eastern Europe nor the East-West rivalry, most pronounced in the Indo-Pacific region between China and the United States, are new developments. For many years already, Russia has shown in Chechnya, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine its appetite for ruthless expansion at the expense of other countries under flimsy grounds of ethnic affinity or out of the simple ambition to restore a Russian empire. President Putin’s declaration in 2005 that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”<sup>1</sup>, relegating two world wars and the holocaust to the rank of sec-

ondary disasters, was already a clear indication where he intended to take the Russian Federation. Even the brutal tactics currently deployed by Russian forces in Ukraine and the use of mercenaries of the notorious Wagner group were tested – in full knowledge of the international community – in Libya, Syria, Mali, and the Central African Republic.

Similarly, the China-US rivalry has been brewing for several years, to the point where Washington declared communist China as the biggest threat to its national security. Taiwan has been a flashpoint of tensions in the Pacific, together with aggressive Chinese claims on disputed territories in the South China Sea.

Considering China’s ambition to supplant the US as the dominant global power, it should not have come as a surprise that China was taking Russia’s side in the war in Ukraine. When you get ready for a fight with the world’s number one superpower, you want to have the other nuclear superpower on your side, in particular if it happens to have a similarly autocratic and personalised regime as China itself. I do not use the expression “nuclear superpower” accidentally: Russia’s claim to be a superpower cannot be based on demographic strength or economic clout<sup>2</sup>, and even its claim to be a superpower in terms of conventional military capacity has been seriously dented in Ukraine; it is, however, still undoubtedly a superpower in terms of its daunting nuclear arsenal.

China’s partnership with Russia makes perfect geopolitical sense, from Beijing’s point of view. In addition to teaming up with another major international player which opposes the global leadership role of the US, it brings China the advantage of cheap Russian oil and natural gas. And because Russia needs China much more than China needs Russia, it is an asymmetric relationship in China’s favour; some have even argued that Russia could become China’s vassal.

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Seen against this broader background, we have reason for concern about the partnership between Beijing and Moscow, and about the seemingly close personal relationship between president Vladimir Putin and president Xi Jinping, but we cannot say this came as a surprise. And the development of the military conflict in Ukraine has changed its nature and perspective. If Russia's invasion had achieved a quick success in its "special military operation", as not only the Kremlin had anticipated but also many experts in the West had feared, then the strengthening of the relationship between Beijing and Moscow would indeed be reason for alarm. The partnership would have boosted Russia's revisionist ambitions in eastern Europe; it would have encouraged China to pursue its aggressive policy towards Taiwan and towards its neighbours in the South China Sea in general; and most critically, it would have promoted authoritarianism globally and possibly ushered in a period of unbridled power politics, at the expense of an already tenuous rules-based international order.

But history has taken a different turn when the Ukrainian people and their leadership decided to take up the fight, even if the odds seemed to be stacked against them. Instead of a quick-and-dirty regime change that would have brought Ukraine under the influence of Moscow, the invasion has turned into a drawn-out war that has exposed the weaknesses of the Russian army, put the country under the most serious economic sanctions ever imposed by the transatlantic alliance, and driven it into international isolation. At the meeting of G20 Finance Ministers in India last February, all countries participating except China were ready to condemn the aggression<sup>3</sup>. This is remarkable, considering the hedging positions of many countries of the Global South during successive UN resolutions on the conflict in Ukraine. It shows the degree of isolation that Russia finds itself in after a year of war with little military success, but with dramatic consequences for international food and fuel prices, which caused serious problems for many countries in the Global South.

Significantly, the way the war in Ukraine is going is also a problem for China, even if it is not unhappy to see the US tied up once again with a serious security problem in Europe. Since the beginning, Russia's invasion has disrupted supply chains, dampened the global economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic, and put many countries of the Global South

under financial stress due to rising commodity prices and interest rates, and declining investments<sup>4</sup>. Considering that China is Africa's main creditor, these are worrying developments for Beijing. Equally, China's economy, which is still strongly export-oriented, is suffering from the economic slowdown of its main markets in Europe and the Americas. And China has clearly expressed its unease with Russia's repeated nuclear threats because the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine could create a precedent for their deployment in other theatres in the Indo-Pacific, which would be to China's disadvantage.

China sticks to Russia because of geostrategic opportunism, because of the autocratic affinity of the two regimes and of the two leaders, and because of China's access to cheap Russian natural resources. This is unlikely to change unless there are significant political upheavals on one or the other side. But it does not mean that the partnership is as unlimited as it was initially advertised. Notably, there is so far no evidence that China is providing weapons to the depleted Russian conventional arsenal, as confirmed by US president Joe Biden<sup>5</sup>. This is significant, considering massive Western military support to Ukraine, which could have motivated China to assist its "partner" in a similar way. China, however, is wary of secondary sanctions, as its trade connections with the West are much more important than its economic links to Russia.

China's dilemma lies in the fact that the liberal, free-market, Western global order which it is now challenging has enabled its dramatic economic development over the last three decades. China may contemplate a gradual decoupling of its economy from the West in order to eschew in the future the economic pain Russia is currently experiencing due to Western sanctions, but such decoupling comes at a significant cost that China can hardly afford. Its rivalry with the US and its aggressive stance in the Indo-Pacific has already alienated many east Asian neighbours<sup>6</sup>. China still has strong connections with countries in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America, but whether these would enable Beijing to build an anti-Western economic block that could fuel continued economic growth without Western markets is highly doubtful. Most countries of the Global South have made it quite clear in their statements and their positioning in multilateral fora that they do not want to get drawn into a new Cold War.

China's relationship with Russia is therefore quite opportunistic and carefully calculated. It is not the result of a deep convergence of interests or of strong ideological affinity. The European Union and the transatlantic alliance should take note, as China's interests and the specific nature of its relationship with Russia might offer an opening for a diplomatic solution to a conflict that has taken a heavy toll on both Ukrainian and Russian society, and on global economic growth.

### China's "peace plan"

On the anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, China has released a position paper on the Russia-Ukraine war, in which it calls for a ceasefire and talks between the two parties, the establishment of humanitarian corridors to evacuate civilians, and steps to ensure grain exports after last year's disruptions that caused serious difficulties to many developing countries and aggravated food insecurity in Africa and parts of Asia. Unsurprisingly, the paper also calls for an end to Western sanctions against Russia – a non-starter for the transatlantic alliance as long as Russia occupies Ukrainian territories – but there are elements that clearly align with European and generally Western interests: Beijing opposes the threat or use of nuclear weapons and it reaffirms the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries. The latter two positions stand in stark contrast to Moscow's repeated nuclear threats and to the Kremlin's view that Ukraine is not a real nation. While China has not condemned Russia's aggression, it has also not made any statements recognizing Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territories.

China's proposals should not be discarded because we find certain elements unacceptable; rather, we should consider the position paper as an opening bid. As a matter of principle and for the sake of the aggression's many victims on and far beyond the battlefields in eastern Ukraine, but also because of the risks of a protracted war for Ukraine, any serious proposal for a negotiated solution should be carefully looked at. Dismissing Beijing's initiative because China is partial is disingenuous – we do not dismiss the US as a mediator in the conflict between Israel and Palestine because of American military support to Israel. In this as well as in many other cases, having an influential rather than a neutral mediator

has proven to be useful, because the ability to use the mediator's influence on one or the other party is often essential in order to get to a deal.

Eventually, the willingness to negotiate and to seek a compromise is in the hands of the Ukrainian people and their leadership, as they are the principal victims of the invasion. Obviously, Ukraine but also Georgia and Moldova as well as other potential targets of Russian aggression will need solid security guarantees to avoid that a cease-fire or peace agreement is used by Russia as an opportunity to recover and prepare for another revisionist attack or subversion. As has been pointed out<sup>7</sup>, there are no more "buffer states" between the liberal, democratic part of Europe and Russia, but a hard border that has to be defended – by military means, if necessary.

President Zelensky reacted cautiously to Beijing's peace plan, knowing well that it is not in Ukraine's interest to alienate China, an important economic partner, and that an outright rejection of China's proposal could alienate the Global South, where many have called for a diplomatic settlement. Furthermore, Xi Jinping, more than anybody else, has influence on Vladimir Putin and can perhaps dissuade him from another escalation of the conflict.

### What next ?

Xi Jinping and Zelensky spoke on the phone on 26<sup>th</sup> April, and the Ukrainian president has described the conversation as "long and meaningful". The call follows Xi's visit to Moscow from 20<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2023, as China is positioning itself for a mediating role which has few competitors. For the EU and the transatlantic alliance, this is uncomfortable because of China's close relationship with Russia and because of the risk that a Chinese peace initiative, coinciding with a Ukrainian counter-offensive, could blur the distinction between the aggressor and the victim of the aggression in the eyes of the Global South, which is more concerned about the impact of the conflict than about multilateral principles, which have been violated by others in the past. But ignoring China's diplomatic overtures is not a reasonable option, as it would expose the EU and the transatlantic alliance to criticism of being war mongers, as even the Ukrainian leadership has shown a cautiously positive attitude.

Eventually, the Ukrainian people and their leaders will have to decide if or when it is worthwhile to engage in negotiations to end the war, or whether they want to take the risk of attempting a clear military victory that would allow them to dictate the terms of their future relations with Russia. Western societies' continued willingness to support them in their efforts are a crucial element to take into consideration.

The European Union and its transatlantic allies should continue providing military, economic and humanitarian support to Ukraine and insist on the full respect of the UN Charter and humanitarian principles. At the same time, they should be open to all options for a diplomatic resolution that guarantees Ukraine's sovereignty as well as Europe's security against revisionist aggression – in all parts of the continent. And get ready to defend this position at the negotiation table, if or when the time comes.

## References

- 1 Vladimir Putin in his annual state of the nation address to the parliament in Moscow in April 2005.
- 2 With 146 million people, Russia is among the middle ranking demographic powers, behind Pakistan, Brazil, Nigeria and Bangladesh. In spite of exceptional endowment with natural resources, in terms of GDP, Russia is on 11th place behind Italy, Canada and South Korea.
- 3 “Most G20 nations condemn Russia for war, China silent”, Reuters, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2023
- 4 “Macroeconomic Developments and Prospects in Low-Income Countries”; IMF, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2022
- 5 “Joe Biden says no sign yet of China sending Russia weapons”, Al Jazeera, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2023; see also: Why China Backtracked on Military Assistance to Russia and Why the Policy Will Stick, The National Interest, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2023
- 6 “How China Lost Asia”, Yoon Young-Kwan, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2023, Project Syndicate
- 7 “Europe's New Frontier. We thought there were buffer states in Europe. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has revealed they are frontier ones”, Nathalie Tocci, Foreign Policy, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2023