

George N. Tzogopoulos - 10 May 2023

China and the War in Ukraine

Introduction

On 4 February 2022, Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin met in China. The latter went to Beijing to attend the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games, and, on this occasion, he signed with his Chinese counterpart a joint statement. This joint statement 'on the international relations entering a new era and the global sustainable development' identifies several areas of Sino-Russian cooperation including on arms control, world governance, artificial intelligence and space.¹ Twenty days later, Russia launched its war against Ukraine, a decision that put China in an uncomfortable position concerning its general role in this conflict and in the international system. Whether the Chinese government had direct knowledge about the intention of the Kremlin cannot be confirmed. A relevant report published by *The New York Times* asserting that China had asked Russia to delay the war until after the Olympics was refuted by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.² Irrespective of this, China would have to carefully adjust its strategy to new realities.

The Chinese Thinking

The Chinese Communist Party (CPC) values stability and continuity in the world. Every type of development that causes uncertainty is not welcomed as a matter of principle. The war in Ukraine falls within this category. When it broke out the CPC was concentrating on domestic affairs. The successful organization of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics was followed by that of the annual Two Sessions, the National People's Congress, and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and later, in October 2022, by the 20th National Congress that confirmed the third term of President Xi Jinping. From an economic prism, the moment was delicate. The Chinese government was applying draconian measures to contain the novel coronavirus, the so-called zero-COVID policy, and was striving to strike a balance between the protection of public life and the support of growth. The war in Ukraine perplexed matters. The

typical objectives to secure energy and food security became harder to achieve amid serious disruptions in supply chains and volatility in the international markets. The Chinese economy finally grew at a pace of 3 percent in 2022, while initial estimations had predicted a higher rate.

The conflict in Ukraine also posed obstacles for the realization of the Belt and Road Initiative. Routes through Ukraine were cut off, whereas the Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor, was directly affected because transportation through Russia and Belarus became almost impossible. China started thus to explore alternatives such as Turkey's Middle Corridor.³ Additionally, Chinese-Ukrainian economic cooperation could be somewhat jeopardized. Ukrainian statistics demonstrate that China was the most important trade partner of Ukraine in 2021, which witnessed trade volume reach approximately \$19 billion.⁴ It principally imported iron ore, agricultural products and jet turbine engines.⁵ As far as Chinese investments are concerned, they covered several sectors such as agriculture, construction, real estate, transportation etc. According to *Bloomberg*, an example of the war impact on Chinese investments was recorded during fighting around Mariupol, when the sunflower oil plant of the Chinese company Cofco located there was damaged.⁶

At the political level, the beginning of the war in Ukraine generated multifaceted dilemmas for the CPC. The evacuation of circa 6,000 Chinese nationals stranded in the conflict immediately became a priority.⁷ Other calculations followed suit. While the afore-mentioned Sino-Russian statement had outlined the strategic depth of the bilateral partnership, China needed to calibrate its stance and better serve its interests. This required a complex combination of policies: to preserve good ties with Russia without becoming directly involved in the conflict, and simultaneously, to maintain a minimum degree of collaboration with the West which is crucial for China's economic progress and development. From a Chinese perspective, the future position of Russia in the international system will have an impact on the evolution

* George N. Tzogopoulos is a lecturer and the Director of EU-China Programmes at CIFE.

of the Sino-American antagonism. Hence, China has decided to act in a manner ensuring that the end of the Ukraine war, whenever it comes, would not find it weaker against the USA. A defeated and crushed Russia, as Washington envisages, does arguably look desirable in Beijing.

The Security Environment, Sanctions and Weapons

China does not support the war as a means of solving the Ukraine crisis. Nevertheless, it exhibits an understanding of Russian security interests and prefers to abstain in UN votes, as it had done with the case of Crimea in 2014. In particular, the Chinese government does not believe that the problem suddenly erupted on 24 February 2022, the day the invasion was launched. On the contrary, it diagnoses its roots in the period prior. It subsequently argues that the USA had cultivated tensions for years and had failed to take Russian concerns into account by pushing for NATO enlargement instead. This is perhaps a message the Chinese government sends to the West with reference to the Indo-Pacific. The CPC denotes that security arrangements ought to be mutually accepted in areas where interests contradict each other or overlap. As long as the USA endeavors to expand previous alliances and build new ones in the Indo-Pacific, China sees some evolving risks for its core interests. The situation becomes even more complicated in the Taiwan Strait as China considers the Taiwan Question its internal affair.

While Beijing says that its position is balanced and neutral, both the USA and the EU and other countries such as Australia, Canada and Japan cast doubts. The Chinese government has not joined the chorus of Western sanctions against Russia. This means that China belongs to a group of states, often associated with the Global South, which disagree with the logic of Russia's isolation and normally continue their trade relations. The Asian giant's clout as the second most important economy in the world is notable in that regard. A European Central Bank analysis shows that China provided almost half of Russia's goods imports as of January 2023.⁸ More importantly, China receives important lessons from the policy of sanctions the West applies against Russia and builds economic resilience in a phase during which Washington is flirting with the prospect of decoupling from Beijing. Efforts to do business without relying on the US

dollar have accelerated, and these go beyond Sino-Russian trade. In April 2023, for instance, Brazil took some steps to transact in yuan.⁹ Saudi Arabia is also mulling to use the Chinese currency to trade its oil with China.¹⁰

Another important theme in relation to the Ukraine war is that of the shipment of military equipment. The West has warned China not to provide military support to Russia. To do so would be 'a bad mistake' US national security adviser Jake Sullivan said in February 2023.¹¹ Also, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen clarified that the EU 'counts on China not to provide any military equipment, directly or indirectly, to Russia' during her Beijing visit in April.¹² The Chinese government, from its side, does not accept coercion and rejects as 'disinformation' public references about its openness to weapons and offer ammunition to Russia.¹³ On the contrary, it puts the blame on the West for being actively involved in the conflict and arguably adding fuel to the fire. For China, the issue is not localized but might have dramatic repercussions in Asia. The theoretical interest of South Korea to militarily aid Ukraine following American encouragement,¹⁴ will impact the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Russia could respond, in a quid pro quo manner by arming North Korea.¹⁵ A new wave of instability in a changing world will perhaps transform the Korean Peninsula into a tinderbox, an anathema for Beijing.

China's Peace Plan

The continuation of the conflict in Ukraine and grim perspectives about a cessation of hostilities are generating a particularly difficult debate on future scenarios. China, which returned to normalcy in 2023 after three years of strict lockdown policies, is making a diplomatic comeback in the international sphere. Its Global Security Initiative, a concept first proposed by President Xi Jinping in April 2022, is being currently promoted. The relevant concept paper discusses the necessity to 'eliminate the root causes of international conflicts, improve global security governance [and] encourage joint international efforts to bring more stability and certainty to a volatile and changing era.' It refers, inter alia, to the commitment to abide by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter as well as to 'take the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously.'¹⁶ Rolling out its ambitions, China scored a significant foreign policy success in March

2023 when it mediated between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Under its aegis, the two countries resumed diplomatic relations.

In a similar vein, the Chinese government is elaborating on a potential settlement of the war in Ukraine. On 24 February 2023, on the first anniversary of the invasion, it announced its peace plan. This peace plan is based on twelve points and encompass references to the respect of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, the cessation of hostilities, the resumption of peace talks, the abandonment of Cold War mentality, the stop of unilateral sanctions and the protection of civilians and prisoners of war.¹⁷ Reactions have varied. The USA and the EU see no distinction between the aggressor and the victim, whereas Russia finds some of Chinese ideas useful.¹⁸ Ukraine, for its part, sees some value in the Chinese peace plan.¹⁹ President Volodymyr Zelensky has expressed his will to meet his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping and discuss details – especially regarding the withdrawal of Russian troops from his country, a thorny theme China is not publicly mentioning. Their recent telephone conversation was perhaps a step toward this direction. President of France Emmanuel Macron does not reject China's involvement either. When he travelled to Beijing in April 2023, he said that although he does not agree with all points of the Chinese proposals, the plan shows China's determination 'to play a responsible role and try to build a pathway to peace.'²⁰

Terms for a potential ceasefire are sensitive and conditions for a political agreement multidimensional and highly controversial. But China is closely monitoring the war in Ukraine for an additional reason. This is the existing risk for an escalation, even of nuclear nature. Points 7 and 8 of the peace plan manifest its emphasis on the safety of nuclear plants,

mainly the one located in Zaporizhzhia, and its opposition 'to the threat or use of nuclear weapons.'²¹ In that regard, the content of the Sino-French joint declaration signed in the Chinese capital in April 2023 is similar.²² In January 2022, a few weeks before the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the leaders of the five nuclear-weapon states of the UN Security Council had also signed a joint statement affirming 'that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.'²³ Certainly, recurrent Russian threats to use tactical nuclear weapons in Ukrainian battlefield do not please the Chinese government.

Conclusion

In a recent interview, prominent German Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger argued that the West would need to pair its military aid to Ukraine with a preparation of a diplomatic process. He also said that negotiations with Russia might be possible – subject to verification.²⁴ Whether China could mediate to bring the war to an end or facilitate some talks remains debatable in Western circles. While disagreements on this theme have multiplied in the aftermath of President's Macron visit in Beijing, it is somewhat unorthodox to expect from the Chinese government to play a role by embracing the Western narrative or by ascribing to Western interests. China is eager to cooperate with both the USA and the EU but not at the expense of its own strategic calculations. It is also aware, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army General Mark A. Milley has said, that 'fighting a war with Russia and China simultaneously would be very difficult' for Washington.²⁵ China strives to empower its position in a changing world order. It is through this lens that it is looking into the war in the Ukraine, and is assessing the scope of its relations with both Russia and the West.

References

- 1 Kremlin website, *Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development*, 4 February 2022.
- 2 Edward Wong and Julian E. Barnes, 'China Asked Russia to Delay Ukraine War Until After Olympics, US Officials Say', 2 March 2022 and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China website, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference*, 3 March 2022.
- 3 Tuba Eldem, 'Russia's War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity', SWP Comment 2022/C 64, 28 October 2022.
- 4 Embassy of Ukraine in the People's Republic of China website, 'Trade and Economic Cooperation', 16 May 2022.
- 5 The Bank of Finland Institute for Emerging Economies, 'China's Imports from Ukraine Quadrupled over the Past Four Years', 25 February 2022.
- 6 Bloomberg website, 'Chinese Trader Cofco's Sunflower Oil Plant Near Mariupol Damaged', 5 April 2022.
- 7 Cyril Ip, 'About Half of China's 6,000 Citizens in Ukraine Evacuated as Safety Concerns Grow', 3 March 2022.

- 8 Demosthenes Ioannou, Laura Lebastard, Adrian Schmith, Isabel Vansteenkiste, *'A Year of International Trade Diversion Shaped by War, Sanctions, and Boycotts'*, 12 April 2023.
- 9 Bloomberg website, *'Brazil Takes Steps to Transact in Yuan as China Ties Grow'*, 30 March 2023.
- 10 Chi Lo, *'Renminbi Internationalization - The Petro-yuan and the Role of Gold'*, 6 January 2023.
- 11 Kelly Garrity, *'Jake Sullivan: Aiding Russia Would Be a 'Bad Mistake' for China'*, 26 February 2023.
- 12 European Commission website, *Remarks by President von der Leyen at the Press Conference at the End of Her Visit to China*, 6 April 2023.
- 13 Wang Qi, *'US Urged to Stop Spreading Disinformation on China's Military Aid to Russia; Public Opinion War Exposes Washington's Anxiety'*, 27 February 2023.
- 14 Soyoung Kim, Ju-min Park and Hyonhee Shin, *'Exclusive: South Korea's Yoon Opens Door for Possible Military Aid to Ukraine'*, 19 April 2023.
- 15 TASS website, *'Medvedev Cautions South Korea against Weapons Supplies to Kiev'*, 19 April 2022.
- 16 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China website, *The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper*, 21 February 2023.
- 17 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China website, *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*, 24 February 2023.
- 18 Alexandra Brzozowski, *'NATO and EU Give Skeptical Reaction to China's Peace Proposal for Ukraine'*, 24 February 2023, and TASS website, *'Some Chinese proposals Could Serve as Basis for Ukraine Peace Plan – Russian MFA'*, 21 April 2013.
- 19 Le Monde website, *'Ukraine Sees Some Value in Chinese Peace Plan'*, 24 February 2023.
- 20 Clea Caulcutt, Lili Bayer and Suzanne Lynch, *'China Has Key Role in Finding Path to Peace in Ukraine, Macron Says'*, 5 April 2023.
- 21 See *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*.
- 22 Élysée website, *Déclaration Conjointe Entre la République Française et la République Populaire de Chine*, 7 April 2023.
- 23 White House website, *Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races*, 3 January 2022.
- 24 Ayhan Simsek, *'West Needs to Prepare for Diplomacy to End War in Ukraine: Former German Diplomat'*, 5 April 2023.
- 25 US Department of Defense website, *'Milley Says War With China, Russia Not Inevitable'*, 29 March 2023