



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Security Review

Giorgi Badridze

China's Position on the War between Russia and Ukraine

2022

All rights reserved and belong to Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, including electronic and mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher. The opinions and conclusions expressed are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

Copyright © 2022 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

China has been one of the most influential countries in the world for many years, and its position on many issues of international relations has considerable weight. When, in 2021, Russia increased its political, economic, and military pressure on Ukraine to such an extent that a new and much larger-scale aggression than that of 2014 became a real prospect, China's position in this matter acquired a decisive significance. It is difficult to imagine that Putin would have made a decision on a full-scale attack on Ukraine without at least hoping for

political and economic support from China. Even if the Russian officials were under the illusion that Ukraine would stop resistance within a few days, China's support was still crucial for them in the escalated conflict with the West. Since then, China has repeatedly expressed its position, probably quite honestly, that it never supported the war in Ukraine. However, Russia itself did not intend the kind of war that it has to wage today, as it hoped for a quick and more or less bloodless success.

In this study, we discuss what Russia expects from China's position in the Russo-Ukraine war, as well as China's actions thus far, and its prospective role.

In the months leading up to the massive invasion of Ukraine, Russia had been deliberately trying to draw closer to China and make new agreements in order to win its support in the face of its inevitable confrontation with the West over the war of aggression in-the-making. From this point of view, it is important to analyze the pre-war dynamics of cooperation between these two countries.

By the summer of 2021, there were already signs that the Kremlin was preparing the ground for a final resolution to the "Ukraine issue". Although, by this time, the military exercises known as "Zapad" already been occurring regularly, and the Russian government's rhetoric of that time, and the scale of the exercises, were giving Ukraine and the West a reason for serious concern.

Putin's article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," published on July 12, further aggravated the situation. With its pseudo-historical content, the article was an attempt to present the independence of Ukraine as illegitimate and to justify Russia's future actions aimed at the destruction of the Ukrainian state.

Interestingly, the very next day, on July 13, 2021, Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping and President Putin celebrated the 20th anniversary of the "Treaty on Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation" between the two countries. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement, saying that "China will continuously enhance the China-Russia strategic partnership and coordination of joint efforts for the new era..."

The armed forces of Russia and China took part in the joint exercises of China's Western Military District on August 9-13, which was the first joint military exercise of these countries on the territory of China.

Units of the People's Liberation Army of China participated in the international military games held by Russia on August 23. The three components of the same games were held in China's Xinjiang province.

On November 25, Wu Qian, a representative of the Chinese Armed Forces, said that the two countries' "military cooperation has limitless scope..." He said that the militaries of the two nations are "conducting strategic communication, strengthening pragmatic cooperation in the field of military exercises, and improving military cooperation through the mechanisms of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization." ¹

In December 2021, with Russian troops deployed on three sides of Ukraine, Putin made the situation even more tense. In contrast to the general rhetoric, he now presented his demands to NATO in official written form. Moscow published a draft agreement on December 17, ("Agreement on the Security of the Russian Federation and the Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization"),² demanding "legally binding" guarantees that NATO would not only not expand, but would in fact abandon its responsibility to protect Central and Eastern European members who joined the alliance after 1997. Given that the guarantees for NATO's non-expansion were unrealistic, and a return to the 1997 situation was completely out of the question, the Russian gesture was clearly aimed at finding an excuse for the already planned escalation and presenting clear and plain aggression as a "defensive" act. It should be noted here that the expansion of NATO never posed a threat to Russia - it had its most stable relations with its Western neighbors who are members of NATO, and its worst relations with those who were unable to join it (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova). And what is more important, even if the Kremlin's fear of NATO was sincere, there were no indications that Ukraine would be joining NATO in 2021 or in the near future. And despite the promise of accession that NATO gave to Georgia and Ukraine at the 2008 Bucharest summit, both countries were refused the Membership Action Plan (MAP), which is the only practical mechanism for accession, primarily due to Germany's insistence. As such, Russia presented an absurd and unachievable ultimatum to the West, the real reason for which was to concoct a pretext for attacking Ukraine. Accordingly, when on January 26, 2022, NATO and President Biden separately gave

¹ China-Russia Interactions Leading up to the Invasion of Ukraine, U.S.-CHINA ECONOMIC AND SECURITY REVIEW COMMISSION of the United States Congress, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/china-russia-interactions-leading-invasion-ukraine>

² Steven Pifer, Russia's draft agreements with NATO and the United States: Intended for rejection?, Brookings Institution, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/12/21/russias-draft-agreements-with-nato-and-the-united-states-intended-for-rejection/>

an official negative response to Russia, stating that NATO was maintaining its "open door" policy, Putin declared that the West had neglected Russia's legitimate security concerns.

They surely must have known about this in China; however, against this backdrop, Beijing gave its full support to Russia. On February 3, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov held talks to "comprehensively discuss and coordinate positions" on a number of issues, including Ukraine.

On February 4, Russian President Vladimir Putin, at the Beijing Winter Olympics, held an official meeting between with the Chinese leader Xi Jinping, after which it was announced that the cooperation between the two countries would take the form of a "limitless partnership".

A joint statement issued afterwards read that the two sides jointly opposed "further enlargement of NATO and called on the alliance to abandon approaches based on Cold War ideology."³ The statement also said that "NATO must respect the sovereignty, security, and interests of other countries, the diversity of other civilizations, cultural and historical origins, and develop an objective approach to the peaceful development of other countries." (ibid.)

Given what Russia did within days of this announcement, we must assume that Putin felt he was guaranteed at least China's political and economic support.

It is also likely that in exchange for such support, the Chinese side received certain guarantees. It is completely impossible for China to accept the prospect of a long war in Ukraine and, as such, an all-out confrontation with the West (and especially the use of nuclear weapons). Therefore, Xi Jinping must have had a promise from Putin that the planned "special military operation" would last only a few days (as Putin and his advisers believed).

Thus, before and in the first days of the invasion of Ukraine, China's actions were dictated by the logic that Russia would quickly conduct a military operation which would result in the displeasure of the West, but based on a previous experience, the response would be limited to ineffective sanctions, and that too for a limited time.

Western sanctions imposed on Russia would, to some extent, help China, and are still in its interest. In theory, it would make Russian oil, gas, and other raw materials cheaper for China,

³ China-Russia Interactions Leading up to the Invasion of Ukraine, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/china-russia-interactions-leading-invasion-ukraine>

and would increase the possibility of Chinese exports to Russia. However, everything developed in a different way.

As mentioned, China initially followed the arranged plan. On February 24, the day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's customs service lifted restrictions on Russian wheat imports. Days before the invasion, Putin announced a multi-year oil and gas export deal with China worth \$117.5 billion.

Also a few days before the war, Russia and China agreed to use the Yuan as a transactional currency (previously, the two sides had used US dollars) for keeping an aviation fuel depo for Russian aircrafts in China, reflecting the broader and far-reaching common interests of these two countries.

However, if we track the chronology of China's actions after the start of the war, it will become clear that the "limitless partnership" between Russia and China actually has quite specific limits.

From the very first days of the war, the coverage of the conflict by the Chinese media showed that the official censorship did not allow the dissemination of information against the interests of Russia. Like the Russian propaganda, they blamed the US and the West, not the Kremlin, for initiating the war.

On the first day of the war, February 24, the official representative of China's Foreign Affairs Ministry refused to call the situation an "invasion" of Russia in Ukraine and, in accordance with the Russian position, referred to it as a "special military operation", while avoiding questions about the territorial integrity of Ukraine and, on the same principle, about the issue of Taiwan.

In short, at the beginning of the war, China practically showed full political support to Russia. Beijing abstained from voting on the UN Security Council resolution condemning Russia's aggression (a Russian veto would have sufficed to torpedo the resolution). In phone conversations with the foreign ministers of Britain, France, and the European Union, China's foreign minister practically quoted Putin's statement when he referred to the "five waves of NATO expansion" as a factor undermining Russia's security.

However, the first limits of the above-mentioned "limitless partnership" between the two countries appeared not long after, when the sanctions imposed on Russia affected the interests of Chinese companies. Although China has never joined the anti-Russian sanctions, they have

forced China to adjust its own actions. Examples of this have been present since the second day of the war, when, for example, Chinese oil importing companies had to temporarily stop buying Russian oil in order to assess the risks associated with importing it by sea. On the same day, due to sanctions, the two largest Chinese banks, the Industrial & Commercial Bank of China and Bank of China, stopped financing purchases of Russian products (mainly raw materials). The effect of international sanctions in the following months affected many more Chinese companies that previously had close cooperation with Russia and, despite the official position of the Chinese government, they had to de facto join the sanctions.

China's attitude towards the international sanctions is interestingly characterized in a report published by "The Guardian" that three months after the start of the war, the Chinese government commissioned the National Bank and several other economic regulatory organizations to conduct a study to investigate the effects of hypothetical Western sanctions on the Chinese economy.⁴ This indicates that China will try to utilize all the trade-economic opportunities created by the imposition of sanctions on Russia, but at the same time rationally calculate the possible costs of the violation of these sanctions, and act accordingly.

Over time, China's diplomatic position became relatively more neutral, and manifested itself in the call that the international community should refrain from the kind of actions that would aggravate the situation in Ukraine. This can be understood in many ways, but in the early phase of the war, it mostly meant opposition to the imposition of sanctions on Russia and to the supply of arms to Ukraine. It is worth noting that, as we will see later, China criticized Russia at a certain stage for using nuclear weapons as a threat, but it has never once condemned or even criticized Russia for the documented war crimes it is committing in Ukraine.

The most important boundary line of the "limitless partnership" appeared when, as a result of growing military failures, Russia experienced a shortage of military aid in Ukraine, in particular of armored vehicles, artillery shells and unmanned aerial vehicles. More than 9 months after the start of the war, there is no verified information that China has supplied Russia with any type of weaponry. So far, only North Korea and Iran have fulfilled this role with the supply of artillery shells and drones. These are countries that consider the USA and the West as their enemies and, unlike China, do not have trade-economic relations with them, while sanctions against them are already in effect.

⁴ Beijing orders 'stress test' as fears of Russia-style sanctions mount, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/04/beijing-orders-stress-test-as-fears-of-russia-style-sanctions-mount>

Undoubtedly, the prolongation of the war fundamentally changed the calculations of the Chinese leadership. China would not mind if Russia strategically weakened the US and the collective West by seizing Ukraine. Russia's rapid success would further damage the image of the US as a leader of the democratic world and put China in a stronger position in global competition with it. This, from Beijing's point of view, would constitute a logical continuation of the weakening of the US as a result of President Obama's voluntary "Deimperialization" policy, President Trump's rejection of traditional military and trade alliances, and President Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan (although the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan was made by the Trump administration, reputational damage for the concomitant outcomes was done to Biden).

The first face-to-face meeting of the leaders of Russia and China since the beginning of the war was held in the city of Samarkand, Uzbekistan, where the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was held in September 2022. Presumably, the conversation had the effect of a cold shower for Putin, because in his comments to the media, he had to admit that "the Chinese side has expressed concern over the current events in Ukraine."⁵ This statement confirmed the information in the media and political circles that Russia's frequent talk about the use of nuclear weapons is unacceptable for China. The recruitment of a nuclear rhetoric has become an echo of Russia's chronic failure at the front line.

Diplomatically, this has been one of the most unsuccessful periods for Putin: He was also criticized publicly by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Samarkand summit for the war in Ukraine, followed by the "rebellion" of Russia's most obedient subjects in October, when Tajik leader Emomali Rahmon harshly criticized Russia in front of the cameras at the Russia-Central Asia Summit meeting held in Kazakhstan (footage was also released in the media of how Putin was forced to wait for his Asian colleagues, who were late for the meeting).

Russia's diplomatic failure continued through November. During a meeting with Olaf Scholz in Beijing, Xi Jinping openly and personally criticized Putin when he announced that talks about the use of nuclear weapons are unacceptable.⁶ At the G20 summit held in Indonesia, Putin did not turn up at all, leaving his foreign minister in isolation. During the summit, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized that Russia recognizes the "impossibility and inadmissibility" of using nuclear weapons, which "demonstrates Russia's rational and

⁵ Xi and Putin meet in Uzbekistan for security talks, DW, <https://www.dw.com/en/xi-and-putin-discuss-cooperation-concern-over-ukraine-at-uzbekistan-security-summit/a-63125817>

⁶ China's Xi warns Putin not to use nuclear arms in Ukraine, Politico, <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-xi-jinping-warns-vladimir-putin-not-to-use-nuclear-arms-in-ukraine-olaf-scholz-germany-peace-talks/>

responsible position." These and many other statements of encouragement convey China's real concerns, with Russia periodically softening its nuclear rhetoric and then escalating it again. This was also the case in December, when, within a few hours of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's statement that "the risk of nuclear war has decreased as a result of international pressure,"⁷ once more Putin started talking about the use of nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

A defining factor in China's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war was that China foresaw Russia's actions undermining the leadership of its arch-rival, the US, and weakening the collective West. China was ready to provide political support to Russia and take advantage of the trade and economic opportunities that were bound to arise as a result of the war, when Russia's access to the Western markets would be restricted.

China's attitude and practical actions were influenced by the unexpected prolongation of the war in Ukraine, when it turned out that Russia had had misperceptions about both Ukraine's defensive capabilities and will to fight, and the desire and extent of the Western assistance that would be made available to Ukraine. It is not clear how accurate China's information was about Russia's military capabilities- as it turned out, Russia itself and many Western countries' assessment of Russia's military strength was greatly exaggerated - but as a result of the war, its calculations about Russia as a military partner (or potential adversary), have changed significantly.

As things stand, China is not keen on the victory of the West, which Russia's defeat in Ukraine would ensure, nor is it interested in Russia resorting to escalation in order to win, especially with the use of nuclear (or even tactical) weapons.

China's neutrality is quite conditional, because it is only valid until the red lines of its interests are crossed: On the one hand, it does not join the sanctions, but cooperates with Russia in oil, gas, and all other areas of trade (mostly buying raw materials at greatly discounted rates), but doing so only while its broader commercial and economic interests are not threatened. After

⁷ Scholz: Risk of Russia using nuclear weapons has diminished, for now, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/scholz-risk-russia-using-nuclear-weapons-has-diminished-now-2022-12-08/>

all, China's trade with the US, EU, Japan, and their other allies is many times greater than that it enjoys with Russia.

In the long run, China would not mind if Russia was also weakened (and isolated) by the war - this would help to continue the trend already underway, where Russia becomes a junior geopolitical partner dependent on China and a source of cheap raw materials.

Among China's short-term priorities is the prevention of military, and particularly nuclear, escalation. To achieve that goal it is already exerting pressure both on Russia (as the main potential source of escalation) and on the West, so that it does not ensure complete Russian collapse at the frontline through the effective supply of necessary weapons to Ukraine. From this point of view, China has some leverage on both sides: Russia cannot risk severing economic ties with China, while it would be extremely damaging for the West if China were to decide to increase its support to Russia, especially with regards the supply of arms.⁸

⁸ Speculation that a deal to limit the supply of Western arms to Ukraine in exchange for China not supplying arms to Russia has already been suggested:

Edward Lucas, A secret US-brokered deal gave the Chinese Communist Party a European foothold. Be cross, not grateful, CEPA, <https://cepa.org/article/chinas-victory-in-ukraine/>