

Where does China Stand so far in the Russian Aggression on Ukraine? French, German Leaders Talk to Chinese President about Ukraine Crisis, Certain Shifts in Chinese Narrative Become a Possibility

Following the **Chinese and Russian Presidents** meeting on the sidelines of the Beijing Olympics 2022, the two parties issued a **joint statement which has been often referred to as a major milestone in bilateral relations between the two countries**. The document, published on *February 4, 2022*, underlines the ever-closer relationship between the two countries, while signalling common positions on relevant foreign policy matters.

According to the document, the two parties *“oppose further enlargement of NATO and call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon its ideologized cold war approaches”*. Equally, *“The sides are seriously concerned about the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom (AUKUS), which provides a deeper cooperation between its members in areas involving strategic stability, in particular their decision to initiate cooperation in the field of nuclear-powered submarines. Russia and China believe that such actions are contrary to the objectives of security and sustainable development of the Asia-Pacific region”*. Moreover, *“The Chinese side is sympathetic to and supports the proposals put forward by the Russian Federation to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe”*, a paragraph which could be referred to in the light of Russia’s demand for written guarantees in accordance with its *“indivisible security”* principles.

Certainly, one may comment that, according to the statement, **the two countries pragmatically endorse each other with regard to matters of national interest**: China expressed joint opposition with Russia to NATO’s enlargement in Eastern Europe, while Russia also expressed opposition, along with China, against AUKUS. On the other hand, one may also notice certain intricacies suggesting the complex relations between the two powers: despite Russia having re-endorsed the Chinese position on Taiwan, China did not reciprocate on the issue of Crimea.

To a degree of extent, so far, **China exercised cautiousness when it came to involving itself in the European political issues, positioning itself as a rather economic actor, not a political one**. One may, however, comment that the omission of Ukraine, Belarus, and Republic of Moldova from China’s 16+1 cooperation format could be considered a proof of China’s respect for the perceived Russian influence in Eastern Europe.

One may also argue that **China’s positioning on the Russian aggression on Ukraine could, however, represent a shift when it comes to China’s approach of Eastern Europe and Russia**.

After **China’s Assistant Foreign Minister** Hua Chunying refused to use the term *“invasion”* with regard to Russia’s aggression on Ukraine, calling the situation a *“typical Western framing”* and urging not to *“rush into a conclusion”*, **China’s Permanent Representative to the UN**, Zhang Jun, stressed that *“We welcome and encourage every effort for a diplomatic solution, and call on all parties concerned to continue dialogue and consultation”*, refusing, however, to join a collective rebuke of Kremlin’s actions at the UN level.

During the following days, **China seems to have further nuanced its discourse in the Russian aggression on Ukraine, positioning itself as a possible part of the solution in the Ukraine crisis, rather than an accomplice of Moscow.**

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi seemed to hint, during a press conference on *March 7, 2022*, at China's possible role as a mediator in the conflict, stressing the role of *"persuading peace and promoting talks"*, while mentioning that *"China has done some work in this regard and has been in close communication with all parties"*. In fact, according to the Chinese high-dignitary *"On the second day of the conflict, when President Xi Jinping had a phone call with President Putin at request, he suggested that we would like to see Russia and Ukraine have peace talks as soon as possible."* Moreover, Wang Yi stated that China is *"willing to work with the international community to carry out necessary mediation, when necessary"*.

At the same date, **China also came up with six proposals to deter a large-scale humanitarian crisis**, while announcing that the **Red Cross Society of China will provide Ukraine with a batch of emergency humanitarian aid**. Only two days later, on *March 9, 2022*, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman confirmed a 5 million yuan (approx. 750.000 US\$) **humanitarian assistance package to Ukraine**, consisting of daily necessities.

In a rather unexpected twist of events, the **Chinese President**, Xi Jinping, **participated in a virtual Summit with the French President**, Emmanuel Macron, **and the German Chancellor**, Olaf Scholz, on *March 8, 2022*, in which they talked about the situation in Ukraine.

Following a very brief press release issued by Elysée, the three leaders talked via a three-way video screen, discussing *"the dramatic consequences of Russian aggression in Ukraine, particularly the growing number of civilian victims and refugees."*

According to the equally short German account, all the participating parties *"agreed to fully support all negotiations aimed at a diplomatic solution to the conflict"* and convened *"functioning humanitarian corridors must be created."*

The more extensive Chinese press release, as published by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Chinese President maintained that ***"that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries must be respected, the purposes and principles of the UN Charter must be fully observed"***, a statement which could be interpreted as a criticism addressed to Kremlin. On the other hand, the Chinese leader equally agreed that ***"the legitimate security concerns of all countries must be taken seriously"***, in an apparent reference to **Ukraine's demands to join NATO**. While commending *"the mediation efforts by France and Germany on Ukraine"*, China agreed to *"stay in communication and coordination with France, Germany and the EU and, in light of the needs of the parties involved, work actively together with the international community"*, a statement that **could be interpreted as a renewed veiled offer to participate in a mediation process**. During the same meeting, Beijing seems to have officially expressed its **support for EU's strategic autonomy efforts**: *"China supports France and Germany in promoting a balanced, effective and sustainable European security framework for the interests and lasting security of Europe, and by upholding its strategic autonomy. China will be pleased to see equal-footed dialogue among the EU, Russia, the United States and NATO."*

While a comprehensive strategic partner of Russia and a supporter of Russia's strategic interests in Europe,

as expressed in the February 4 Sino-Russian Joint Statement, some may argue **China could not be considered the most suitable and neutral candidate to mediate the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Apparently, China is also not ready to call the Russian aggression on Ukraine an “invasion”, which may cast a shadow of doubt on its good offices on Ukraine’s behalf.** Naturally, one could also think of President Xi’s charisma in relation with President Putin, which **could be exerted in order to cease the hostilities, in the perspective of a new geopolitical configuration – a predictable outcome of the on-going situation.** One could similarly argue that Beijing does not seek to be labeled anti-Western, yet also acts in virtue of its comprehensive strategic partnership with Kremlin, which renders China’s position unique in the international community. In this regard, it is expected for Beijing to be courted by both sides, i.e. the West and Russia, to participate in the peace negotiations. Such a role might assure, in turn, China’s recognition as a soft power and further consolidate its status as an economic superpower.

Beijing may envisage that – in the aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian War – a new Cold War may emerge. **While all parties might be interested in reiterating international law provisions on national sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national security, China may also seek promoting its own conceptualization on human rights.** It is not out of the question that reiterating and – to a certain degree of extent – harmonizing such concepts will take place under the **ideological auspices of two main political models:** a Western-based liberal, democratic and capitalist model and an Eastern nationalist competitor inspired by socialism, aimed for economic growth, poverty alleviation, motivated by historical – possibly territorial – revisionism. Yet, on the other hand, China might not seek a complete breakaway – or decoupling, as often referred to in the Beijing circles – between these two competing models: **East-West cooperation remains paramount for China to fulfill its foreign policy objectives in Europe, Middle East, Africa and Latin America.**

Beijing also needs to take into account that the on-going crisis in the Ukraine may – at a certain moment – place China between a rock and a hard place in the sense that Beijing’s relations with Brussels, Berlin and Paris may further suffer shall it continue to stick to a narrative closer to Kremlin. To the same degree of extent, the on-going crisis may generate a more cautious approach of the Cross-Strait relations by Beijing.

Not least importantly, **China’s own economic interests in Europe, as reflected by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have already been affected by the Russian aggression.** According to media sources, the China-Europe Railway Express (CRE), part of the BRI, has already been disrupted as a result of the Russian invasion, with little chances to become operational again in the near future. In the same key, provided most of the railway routes linking EU and China cross the Russian Federation, in the light of the sanctions against Russia, **it may become increasingly risky for EU companies to ship their products to China using the BRI-related China-built transportation infrastructure.** This, in turn, might have a surprisingly significant impact over BRI overall.

While, in the light of its rather nuanced narrative, China’s position in the Ukrainian crisis is still under discussion, **one may conclude that China’s prospective role – and possible mediation efforts – in the plight of Ukraine will have a long term influence over not only Beijing’s flagship global infrastructure development strategy, i.e. BRI, but also her relations with EU and EU member states.**

Most likely, diplomacy – not military primacy – will play the most significant role in bringing an end to

the crisis in Ukraine. It is also diplomacy – in the first place – that could have saved all the lives so regrettably lost in the conflict.

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