

## **Biden-Xi Video-call Referred to as “Constructive”:**

### **What Could It Mean for the US-China Relations and Ukrainian Crisis?**

The **United States President, Joe Biden**, and the **Chinese President, Xi Jinping**, held a two-hour long video-call on *March 18*. While both sides issued relatively brief press releases, the **Ukrainian crisis figured highly** in both the US and Chinese statements, respectively. In fact, the video-call was the **first direct conversation between the US and Chinese leaders since the Russian invasion of Ukraine**, which began on February 24<sup>th</sup>.

According to the **US readout**, the “*conversation focused on Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine*” as President Biden “*described the implications and consequences if China provides material support to Russia as it conducts brutal attacks against Ukrainian cities and civilians*” and “*underscored his support for a diplomatic resolution to the crisis*”. **While some analysts have referred to the above remarks as a potential US warning to China, the discussion between the two superpowers might have aimed at mutual reassurances that the conflict will not escalate.** It might be for this reason that “*the two leaders also agreed on the importance of maintaining open lines of communication*”, as the US hand-out notes.

**China’s statement**, lengthier in comparison with the US readout, stated the two leaders “*had a candid and in-depth exchange of views on China-US relations, the situation in Ukraine, and other issues of mutual interest*”, ranking the Ukraine crisis second after the discussion on the bilateral relations.

The mention of the “*Shanghai Communiqué*” in the second paragraph of the press release, a document which, in 1972, affirmed Sino-US détente, often interpreted as a key instrument in counteracting the Soviet Union, could represent **a possible hint at a prospective rapprochement between the two powers, aspect further stressed in China’s handout**, by mentioning that “*fifty years on, the US-China relationship has once again come to a critical time. How this relationship develops will shape the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*”

President Xi’s remarks, according to which “*as permanent members of the UN Security Council and the world’s two leading economies, China and the US must not only guide their relations forward along the right track, but also shoulder their share of international responsibilities and work for world peace and tranquillity*” may represent a **possible reference to the global outlook, shall the competition between the two countries reduce in the future.** According to the Chinese leader, “*the US has misperceived and miscalculated China’s strategic intention*”.

On the matter of Ukraine, while stressing China’s role in “*upholding international law and universally recognized norms governing international relations*”, the Chinese President added that “*all sides need to jointly support Russia and Ukraine in having dialogue and negotiation that will produce results and lead to peace*”, avoiding, however, pointing fingers at any of the actors involved, yet further **suggesting a potential dialogue between US,**

## **NATO and Russia.**

Following the handout of the Chinese side *“the two Presidents agreed that the video call is constructive”* and will *“take concrete actions to put China-US relations back on the track of steady development, and make respective efforts for the proper settlement of the Ukraine crisis.”*

The relatively thaw atmosphere in which the two leaders held their discussions was, however, not entirely reflected in the regular press conference held by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the very same day of March 18, 2022. As the Chinese spokesman referred to the NATO-led Operation Joint Endeavour in former Yugoslavia, he asked, rhetorically *“While caring about the Ukrainian people, should we first express our concern about the civilian casualties in these military operations?”*, in a veiled critique aimed to stress that – in the opinion of the Chinese side – the US arms deliveries to Ukraine may not positively contribute to the stability and security in Ukraine, while the humanitarian aid China claims to deliver to Ukraine suits more the current needs of the Ukrainian people.

Certainly, **the discussion between the two Presidents represented the result of intense previous diplomatic negotiations.** Only four days before the Biden-Xi video-call, on March 14, 2022, the **US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met Yang Jiechi, former Chinese Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the US, currently a member in the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party.** Organised in Rome, the meeting of the two dignitaries has been described by media as **important in resetting the tone between Sullivan and Yang, after their rather sharp encounter in Anchorage, in 2021.**

One may argue that, in analysing the conversation between Biden and Xi, a cautious analyst also needs to **take into account the interdependencies between the Chinese and Russian economies, as well as the balance of trade between China and Ukraine.**

With regard to the former, one needs to consider the statement of the current Russian Finance Minister, Anton Siluanov, who declared – according to international media outlets – that *“We have part of our gold and foreign exchange reserves in the Chinese currency, in yuan. And we see what pressure is being exerted by Western countries on China in order to limit mutual trade with China. Of course, there is pressure to limit access to those reserves.”* **While one may assume Russia needs support from Beijing to cushion the impact of the Western sanctions, it is – at the time – a matter of speculation whether China would prevail from the current situation to stimulate its energy imports from Russia or will attempt to ease the US-applied sanctions dating since the “trade war”.**

Clearly, as one of the first countries to recognise Ukraine’s independence, **China seems to maintain excellent political and economic relations with Ukraine, which joined the Belt and Road Initiative as early as 2017.** According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the last conversation between the two countries’ leaders took place in July 2021. In 2011, Ukraine and China held the first meeting of the China-Ukraine Intergovernmental Cooperation Committee, a mechanism which has functioned regularly ever since. From an economic standpoint, in 2021 Ukraine was the third largest trading partner in Eurasia after Russia and Kazakhstan, and China was Ukraine’s largest trading partner.

**One may argue, in this regard, that China’s fine balancing between not condemning the Russian**

invasion, yet supporting the Ukrainian people through humanitarian assistance, while pointing to the observance of the recognized well intended and responsible conduct in international relations is not necessarily the result of diplomatic hesitation or strategic waiting, but rather an approach focusing on the post-crisis shape of international behaviour and environment, strictly based on the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. In this regard, China may envisage not only the political and economic benefits of a balanced diplomacy, but also project itself as a consistent supporter of the principles of International Law in its capacity as a member state of the UN Security Council.

Ultimately, one may only speculate over the potential role of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the US-China competition. In a similarly tense international situation, 50 years ago, the US and China have also issued together the Shanghai Communiqué, a document recently recalled by the Chinese President. **While the Communiqué came to fruition with significant concessions on behalf of both parties, it significantly contributed to the economic rise of China and, some may argue, a more expedite end of the Cold War.**

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