

**IMPACT OF THE UKRAINE WAR ON
CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS (I):
CHINA'S REACTION TO THE
WAR IN UKRAINE**

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Executive Summary

1. China has so far reacted to the Russia-Ukraine War with a three-pronged approach: (i) deny any involvement; (ii) preserve ties with Russia; and (iii) push its views on international relations while brushing up its image as “a responsible big power”.
2. China’s economy is deeply exposed to the market turmoil precipitated by the war and the ensuing sanctions. The war is not in China’s interest and it felt trapped by Putin. China so far has acquiesced to Western demand not to assist Russia’s war effort. However, in the long-run, it is crucial for China to preserve its ties with Russia against an increasingly adversarial West.
3. In strategic and foreign policy circles, there was initially cheering and applause for Putin. Many in China took the war as another lucky break for China, comparable to the “War on Terror” that distracted the United States and bought China almost two decades of peace to concentrate on development. However, China did not expect the West to react so quickly, so strongly and with such unity to Russian aggression.
4. China repeatedly stated that it is “not a party” to the conflict in Ukraine. After more than three months of war, Beijing still refuses to condemn Moscow’s actions and Chinese President Xi Jinping is among the few world leaders yet to have direct talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy. China has also continued to speak out against Western sanctions targeting Russia.
5. China emphasised Russia’s “legitimate security concerns” that had been ignored by the West. Xi, however, in his call to Putin the day after the war broke out, expressed China’s position of “respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations”, including Ukraine.
6. In the call between Biden and Xi on 18 March, Biden warned Xi of the consequences of China aiding Russia. In return, he reiterated America’s position of not seeking a cold war with China, a regime change in Beijing, strengthening alliances against China and supporting Taiwan independence.

7. On 30 March, the foreign ministers of China and Russia met for the first time in Anhui, China after the war broke out. Wang Yi reiterated the Putin-Xi Joint Statement issued on 4 February that the friendship between the two countries has “no limit” and their cooperation has “no forbidden area”.
8. Ambassador Qin Gang declares that “China has been and will remain an independent country that decides its position according to the merits of each matter, immune from external pressure or interference” and “Had similar conflicts happened in other places or between other countries, China’s position would be no different”.
9. For Russia and China, in the short run, the Ukraine war has undermined the mutual trust as Putin had not, it appeared, informed China of the pending war during his visit to Beijing for the Winter Olympics, and China did not come to Russia’s aid in Ukraine. In the long run, the revitalised Western alliance, motivated by a discourse of a struggle between democracy and autocracy, may drive the two closer.

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Uneasy Relationship in an Unsavoury War

- 1.1 “The Ukraine crisis is agonizing”, wrote Chinese ambassador Qin Gang to Washington on *The National Interest*,¹ which summarises well China’s dilemma on this event. The war puts China in an awkward position after President Vladimir Putin’s high-profile attendance at the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics (4 – 20 February 2022) amid the “diplomatic boycott” by major Western countries. Subsequently on 4 February, China and Russia issued a joint statement, declaring that the friendship between the two states “has no limits” and their cooperation has “no forbidden areas”. On 21 February 2022, the second day of the closing ceremony, Putin announced Russia’s formal recognition of the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, and on 24 February, Russia launched full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

- 1.2 Speculations of whether Putin had informed Chinese President Xi Jinping beforehand about his war plan aside, Putin had certainly created the impression that he had China’s consent if not backing, putting China in a difficult position if it was not indeed privy to the pending war. The assessment by CIA Director Bill Burns is that China’s leaders have been caught off guard. “They’re unsettled by the reputational damage that can come by their close association with President Putin [and] second by the economic consequences”, Burns told Congress. He added that they were also surprised “by the way in which Vladimir Putin has driven Europeans

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¹ Qin Gang, “The Ukraine Crisis and Its Aftermath”, 18 April 2022, at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/chinese-ambassador-ukraine-crisis-and-its-aftermath-201867>, accessed 24 April 2022.

and Americans much closer together”.² China felt trapped between Putin’s action of blatant aggression and the West’s unusual solidarity, while its economy is deeply exposed to the market turmoil caused by Putin’s aggression and the subsequent sanctions unleashed.

- 1.3 On one side is the only security partner powerful enough to countervail the US-led coalition in a possible new cold war and on the other side is where the bulk of China’s trade and economic interests reside. China could do without either. The war in Ukraine highlights its dilemma in its ties with Russia and how much trouble the latter can cause China with actions China could neither control nor be adequately consulted.
- 1.4 The West, the United States in particular, has put tremendous pressure on China not to assist Russia, threatening China with similar sanctions as those imposed on Russia. China’s failure to condemn Russia’s aggression and its refusal even to use the term “invasion” to refer to Moscow’s “special military operation” in Ukraine has raised criticisms of its staple foreign policy rhetoric of “non-aggression” and “respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity”. Ambassador Qin Gang complained that the United States was forcing China to take sides and abandon its long-standing “independent foreign policy of peace”.

The Official Stands

- 2.1 A host of considerations puts China in an “agonising” position, concerning not only the bilateral relations with Russia and the United States but also its overarching foreign policy. In the strategic and foreign policy circles, there was initially cheering and applause for Putin. Many in China took the war as another lucky break for China, comparable to the “War on Terror” following 9/11 that distracted the United States and bought China almost two decades of peace to concentrate on development.³ What China did not expect was how the West would react so quickly,

² Cited by *The Financial Times*, “The rising costs of China’s friendship with Russia”, at <https://www.ft.com/content/50aa901a-0b32-438b-ae2-c6a4fc803a11>, accessed 24 April 2022.

³ For example, Zheng Yongnian, “Wukelan zhanzheng yu shijie zhixu chongjian?” (The war in Ukraine and the rebuilding of the world order?), available at <http://comment.cfnisnet.com/2022/0225/1325030.html>, accessed 2 June 2022.

so strongly, and with such unity to Russian aggression, as well as its vigilance not to let China come to Russia's aid, by interrogating its ties with Russia; unlike China's loose ties with Iraq, Syria, Libya or Afghanistan, Russia is closely associated with China in Western mind as a potential "axis of evil".

2.2 After more than three months of war in Ukraine, Beijing still refuses to condemn Moscow's actions and Chinese President Xi Jinping is among the few world leaders yet to have direct talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy. China has also continued to speak out against Western sanctions targeting Russia and has begun ramping up purchases of Russian oil at bargain prices, helping to fill the vacuum left by Western buyers that backed away from the Russian market. "Now that the West has taken a 'dictator's position' [against Russia], our economic ties with China will grow even faster", Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on 23 May.⁴

2.3 China's official stand on the war in Ukraine is to first deny any involvement, second preserve ties with Russia and third push its views on international relations while building up its image as "a responsible big power".

Dissociation from Russia's war effort

2.4 China has portrayed itself as neutral in the Ukraine war and gone into damage control to avoid reputational blowback and secondary sanctions threatened by the West. On 25 February, the second day after the war broke out, President Xi Jinping had a teleconversation with President Putin. According to official Chinese media release, Putin basically related the main argument for launching the war that he set forth in his speeches on 21 and 24 on Russian national TV.⁵ However, Putin did express Russia's willingness to have high-level negotiation with Ukraine. President Xi noted the intense reactions from around the world to the war, and told Putin that

⁴ Reuters, "Moscow not sure it needs resumed ties with West, will work on ties with China –Lavrov", 24 May 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/moscow-not-sure-it-needs-resumed-ties-with-west-will-work-ties-with-china-lavrov-2022-05-23/>, accessed 4 June 2022.

⁵ One on the historical context of the Ukrainian issue and the other on Russia's special military operation in eastern Ukraine. He complained that the United States and NATO have long turned a blind eye to Russia's legitimate security concerns and have repeatedly negated their promises to Russia. Their continued military deployment eastward has challenged Russia's strategic red line.

China “determines its position concerning the Ukrainian issue on its own merits”, “has long held the basic position of respecting all countries’ sovereignty and territorial integrity, abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter” and is prepared to work with other members of the international community “to promote common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, and to resolutely safeguard the UN-centered international system, and the international order underpinned by international law”.⁶

2.5 Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated Xi’s position in Beijing on 7 March 2022, emphasising that China was adopting an “objective and impartial attitude” towards the invasion. On 14 March Wang proclaimed that China is “not a party” to the conflict in Ukraine after allegations in Western media of its connections.⁷ On 15 March, Ambassador Qin Gang published an article in *Washington Post*, in which he tacitly expressed China’s disapproval to Putin’s war, declaring that China “stands to zero benefit” from the war and it would have attempted to dissuade Russia had it known beforehand.⁸

2.6 On 25 February 2022, Wang Yi had phone conversations with UK Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell and Emmanuel Bonne, French diplomatic adviser to the President respectively. He expounded China’s basic position on the Ukraine issue that (i) the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries should be respected; (ii) China advocates common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security; (iii) “the current situation is not what we want to see”; (iv) China supports and encourages all diplomatic efforts conducive to a peaceful settlement of the Ukraine crisis; and (v) the UN Security Council should play a lead role in resolving the conflict.

2.7 Nevertheless, Jake Sullivan, national security adviser to President Biden, raised concerns about China’s alignment with Russia in a seven-hour meeting on 14 March

⁶ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202202/t20220225_10645701.html, accessed 24 April 2022.

⁷ The same as footnote 2.

⁸ Full article available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/15/china-ambassador-us-where-we-stand-in-ukraine/>, accessed 27 April 2022.

with his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi in Rome.⁹ Few details are known about the meeting, but Yang denied reports that Moscow had requested military and economic assistance from China. Sullivan warned that China would face economic consequences and international isolation if it supported Russia by alleviating the sanctions. Yang's response was that the Chinese side had not wanted the situation in Ukraine to "come to this point".¹⁰

- 2.8 On 18 March, President Xi had a video call with President Biden who laid out the consequences should China offer Russia "material support" in the conflict. Thereafter, Biden told the press that he believed China understands that the value of economic cooperation with the West far exceed that with Russia.¹¹ In exchange, Biden reiterated America's position of not seeking a cold war with China, a regime change in Beijing or strengthening alliances against China, and not to support Taiwan independence. In short, the United States does not seek conflict with China.
- 2.9 On 1 April, China-European Union summit was held virtually. The two sides agreed to cooperate in resolving the Ukraine conflict, even if, as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen put it, the two sides held "clearly opposing views" on the conflict. President Xi expressed China's support for the EU to play a leading role in this effort.¹²

Preserving ties with Russia

- 2.10 Despite the overwhelming condemnations of Russia's aggression by the international community, China did not follow suit. It even refuses to use the term "aggression" and instead adopted Putin's term "special military operation". To stay

⁹ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/us-sullivan-chinas-yang-meet-in-rome-chinese-state-media-says>, accessed 24 April 2022.

¹⁰ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Ukraine-war/In-7-hour-talks-U.S.-raises-concerns-about-China-aligning-with-Russia>, accessed 24 April 2022.

¹¹ For example, in February 2022, China's trade with the EU was \$137 billion and \$123.3 billion with the United States; with Russia, it was only \$26.4 billion.

¹² "EU-China summit: cooperation on Ukraine but Beijing won't commit to pressing Russia", *South China Morning Post*, 2 April 2022, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3172831/ukraine-war-eu-and-china-agree-cooperate-beijing-wont-commit>, accessed 24 April 2022.

on good terms with Russia is in many ways an imperative given the precipitous deterioration of the relationship with the West in general, and US-China relations in particular in the past few years—Russia is the only potential ally powerful enough to counterbalance the threat from the West. A senior editor at the official *Xinhua News Agency* posted on Chinese social media that China needs to emotionally and morally support Russia now since “China will also need Russia’s understanding and support when wrestling with America to solve the Taiwan issue once and for all”.¹³ An internal instruction on how to cover the Russia-Ukraine issue appeared to be accidentally leaked. The memo said that content “not positive towards Russia or positive toward the West” was to be banned.¹⁴ China promised to push for peace and ceasefire “but independently in its own ways”. On the American TV programme, “Face the Nation”, Ambassador Qin Gang described the call for China to condemn Russia as “naïve”.¹⁵

2.11 Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov at the third meeting of foreign ministers representing countries neighbouring Afghanistan, in Anhui, China (30 – 31 March). Wang told his Russian guest that “China-Russia relations have withstood the new test of evolving international landscape, remained on the right course and shown resilient development momentum. Both sides are more determined to develop bilateral relations and more confident in advancing cooperation in various fields”.¹⁶

2.12 While the world focused on Russia’s invasion, China stressed the events that precipitated it. During his talk with Jake Sullivan in Rome, Yang Jiechi emphasised that it is important to “straighten out the historical context of the Ukraine issue, get to the bottom of the problem’s origin, and respond to the legitimate security

¹³ <https://www.businessinsider.in/politics/world/news/china-state-media-editor-says-beijing-must-back-russia-over-ukraine-so-it-gets-support-when-it-fights-for-taiwan/articleshow/89775014.cms>, accessed 3 June 2022.

¹⁴ “China keeps walking its tightrope between Russia and the West as tensions flare in Ukraine”, *The Washington Post*, 22 February 2022, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/22/china-russia-ukraine-reaction/>, accessed 24 April 2022.

¹⁵ Interview video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOK2LgrRVr4>, accessed 24 April 2022.

¹⁶ http://www.chinaembassy.org.sg/eng/jrzg/202203/t20220331_10658029.htm, last accessed 24 April 2022.

concerns of all parties”. China apparently has fully accepted Putin’s contention that it is NATO’s eastward expansion despite Russia’s objections that had led to the war in Ukraine.

2.13 Hua Chunying, spokeswoman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, asserted that the United States is “the culprit of current tensions surrounding Ukraine” by ignoring Russia’s “reasonable concerns for security”.¹⁷ The overarching theme of Chinese state media coverage is the depiction of the United States as the instigator of the conflict. *The Global Times*, affiliated with the official *People’s Daily*, has created the hashtag #UkraineCrisisInstigator to describe the United States and NATO. China also invoked its long-standing opposition to “illegal unilateral sanctions” in this case. It has flatly rejected the suggestion that China and Russia have territory issues and China is pursuing a long-term strategy to regain lost territories in the Russian Far East.¹⁸

2.14 Underneath the dominant official discourse, there are however dissenting voices critical of Russia. Having suffered repeatedly from foreign invasions in modern history, many Chinese are naturally averse to foreign aggression wherever it happens and under whatever pretexts. Zhou Bo, a retired senior PLA officer, said on 9 May at an event hosted by an Indian think tank in Delhi, “Russia’s war with Ukraine, no matter how reasonable in responding to NATO’s expansion, cannot be said to be legitimate”.¹⁹ In early March, Hu Wei, vice chairman of the Public Policy Research Centre under an advisory agency of the State Council, called on Beijing to distance itself from Russia as soon as possible over its war in Ukraine.²⁰ Gong Fangbin, a military strategist and retired professor at China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) National Defence University, wrote in a WeChat post, “I still don’t see how any country would have dared to invade the world’s No. 2 military

¹⁷ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202202/t20220223_10644886.html, last accessed 10 March 2022.

¹⁸ Reported by Russian Sputnik News, see <https://sputniknews.cn/20220411/1040608224.htm>, last accessed 24 April 2022.

¹⁹ <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/credibility-of-china-india-suffers-over-russia-issue-chinese-scholar-393290>, accessed 1 June 2022.

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/world/asia/china-ukraine-russia-dissent.html>, accessed 3 June 2022.

power”, which was later censored.²¹ While such commentators are still blaming Washington for the conflict, they highlight a growing vein of criticism of Russia’s actions.

Building up the image as “responsible big power” with a vision for a better world order

2.15 Despite China and Russia being each other’s “strategic anchor”, Xi has sought to enhance his credibility as an equidistant leader more inclined towards world peace than global dominance by not endorsing Russian President Vladimir Putin’s war. Qin Gang declares in his article in *The National Interest*: “China has been and will remain an independent country that decides its position according to the merits of each matter, immune from external pressure or interference” and “Had similar conflicts happened in other places or between other countries, China’s position would be no different”. He describes China-Russia relationship as based on “non-alliance, non-confrontation and non-targeting of third countries”.

2.16 China takes the war as an opportunity to promote its image as an anchor of peace and stability with a better vision of world order amid a turbulent world.²² It pushes for Xi’s “new security concept” that “upholds the principle of indivisibility of security, build a balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture, and oppose the building of national security on the basis of insecurity in other countries”. In September 2021, Xi Jinping proposed “Global Development Initiative (GDI)” in augmentation of the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and on 24 April 2022, Xi put forward a “global security initiative” at the Boao Forum. Deputy Foreign Minister Le Yucheng elaborated on it on 6 May.²³ Wang Yi claimed that the Chinese position on the Ukraine conflict is “objective and fair, consistent with the wishes of most countries” and that “China stands on the right side of history” on

²¹ “Russia’s war on Ukraine based on flawed logic, Chinese military scholar wrote in article scrubbed from the web”. *South China Morning Post*, 21 May 2022. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3178631/russias-war-ukraine-based-flawed-logic-chinese-military>, accessed 1 June 2022.

²² https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/14/world/asia/china-russia-ukraine.html?_ga=2.22523515.1520341494.1654151715-1807058552.1654151715, accessed 3 June 2022.

²³ Respectively at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202109/22/WS614a3c0da310cdd39bc6a868.html>, accessed 27 April 2022 and https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202205/t20220506_10682621.html, accessed 19 May 2022.

this issue.²⁴ Wang seems to have forgotten that the majority of states in the world are against Russia's invasion as the record of their votes in the UN indicate and that Russia's aggression is completely in violation of China's stated principles but China failed to respond accordingly.²⁵

- 2.17 China however did not forget to signal its status as a big power with global reach: it flew 18 sorties over three days (9-11 April 2022) of its new Y-20 heavy transporter through the airspace of two NATO states to deliver the air-defence missiles FK3 (export version of its HQ-22) to Serbia, one of Russia's staunchest allies, while the war was raging in the nearby Ukraine.

The Chinese Calculus

China-Ukraine relations

- 3.1 China is on friendly terms with both Russia and Ukraine. It signed an agreement with Ukraine in late 2013 to extend a nuclear deterrent umbrella to the latter.²⁶ Ukraine played an important role in China's military modernisation when it sold Soviet-style weapon systems to China while Russia was reluctant to do so. For example, China's first aircraft carrier, Liaoning, is developed upon an unfinished Soviet Union carrier *Varyag* sold to China by Ukraine.²⁷ Hundreds of Ukraine engineers are now working in China's defence industries.²⁸

²⁴ https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/gjldrhd_674881/202203/t20220320_10653530.shtml, accessed 20 March 2022.

²⁵ Xi's keynote speech at the annual Boao Forum for Asia delivered via video on 21 April, see <https://www.jfdaily.com/news/detail?id=471350>, last accessed 24 April 2022.

²⁶ Beijing has been silent on this security guarantee since the war broke out. See <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/28/putins-war-tests-chinas-nuclear-pact-ukraine/>, accessed 11 May 2022.

²⁷ For an analysis of Ukraine's ties to China in defence technology, see <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/ukraine-crisis-threatens-chinas-discreet-pipeline-military-technology-2022-03-03/>, accessed 3 June 2022.

²⁸ See Ma Qifei, "Zhongguo yinjin Wukelan jungong mantan: jishuhe rencai bi dayun he hangmu zhongyao", 27 September 2017. (On China's importation of military technology from Ukraine: technology and personnel more important than heavy transporter and aircraft carrier) <https://www.sohu.com/a/195039709114911>, accessed 3 June 2022.

- 3.2 In March, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said that he had received assurances that “China is interested in stopping this war” adding, “Chinese diplomacy has sufficient tools to make a difference, and we count that it is already involved”.²⁹ On 22 May, Ukraine President Zelensky expressed satisfaction that China had stayed neutral in the war.³⁰
- 3.3 However, China did not actively get involved in mediation despite Qin Gang’s claim that China is in a better position to do so than others during his “Face the Nation” appearance. China is even hesitant to serve as one of the guarantors for Ukraine’s security in a peace settlement. It has promised though to play a big role in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. With Ukraine embracing the West at a time when the relationships of both China and Russia with the West are nose-diving, China’s favour naturally is on the Russian side despite its declaration of neutrality. For the long-run, the value of Ukraine to China is declining while that of Russia is rising.

The Taiwan factor

- 3.4 A second reason China did not side with Russia in the latter’s recognition of the independence of two breakaway provinces is its implications for Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet. For the same reason China did not recognise the Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014.
- 3.5 If Russia is successful in its “special military operation” as widely expected, China would probably be emboldened to take similar action on Taiwan as China considers Taiwan an integral part of the motherland, the same way Russia regards Ukraine. Both sides of the Taiwan Strait are carefully watching the developments in Ukraine, with Taiwan drawing lessons from Ukraine’s unexpected success in resisting a much more powerful adversary and China in studying the international repercussions of the Ukraine war. The unprecedented unity of the West and the comprehensive

²⁹ *The Financial Times*, “Ukraine says China is ready to act as a peacemaker”, 6 March 2022, at <https://www.ft.com/content/1e3c79e6-7d07-466b-b159-0742a8393ea7>, last accessed 24 April 2022.

³⁰ <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-polytics/3491793-ukrainu-vlastovue-pozicia-kitau-sodo-vijni-z-rf-zelenskij.html>, accessed 3 June 2022.

sanctions on Russia have made deep impressions on China. It may have to think twice before it decides to forcibly re-unify with the island democracy.

Damage control

- 3.6 The war disruption and Western sanctions on Russia have significantly dampened the growth prospect of the world economy. As Xi Jinping put it, “Sanctions will affect global finance, energy, transportation and stability of supply chains, and dampen the global economy that is already ravaged by the pandemic. This is in the interest of no one”.³¹ Xi’s bias is evident in that he blamed the sanctions instead of the war initiated by Russia as the source of disruption. Immediately relevant to China is the effects of sanctions on Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) with business dealings with Russia. Two of China’s state-owned commercial banks, Bank of China and Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, have restricted financing for purchases of Russian commodities in an apparent move to limit risk exposure to international sanctions against Russia for self-protection.
- 3.7 Food security is another concern as Russia and Ukraine are major exporters of agricultural products. Chinese wheat prices and corn futures are at record highs, prompting a lecture by Xi about the importance of food security to a group of delegates attending the annual session of China’s parliament. “We should not slacken our efforts on food security”, the president said. “Nor should we rely on the international market to solve the problem. We need to be prepared for a rainy day [and] keep food security as our priority”. “Chinese bowls”, he added, should be “mainly filled with Chinese food”.
- 3.8 China is mindful not to incur secondary sanctions. It is also worried about a possible escalation of the war to the use of nuclear weapons as President Putin put Russia’s nuclear force on heightened alert early in the war and Russia’s recent test-fire of RS-28 “Sarmat” intercontinental ballistic missile that Putin bragged as “the best in

³¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, “President Xi Jinping Holds a Virtual Summit with Leaders of France and Germany” at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220308_10649839.html, last accessed 24 April 2022.

the world”. The is also a drag on the global economy and a disruption to the supply chains.

To mediate or not to mediate?

- 3.9 Beijing thus has a vested interest in a quick end to the Ukraine war. It is perhaps the only country that is trusted by Russia and has some leverage over Moscow to gently nudge it in a peace-making direction. China’s robust diplomatic and economic resources could also make it a useful mediator. Ambassador Qin Gang clearly recognised this. Ukraine’s call for mediation has given China a perfect stamp of neutrality.
- 3.10 Nevertheless, China eventually did not take on the responsibility of a mediator. Its initial willingness is short-lived. The lack of trust from Ukraine is one reason. China claims the request for mediation came from the Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who supposedly suggested it to Wang Yi eight days after the beginning of the invasion. However, Ukraine had already approached Europe (and French President), Israel and Turkey before this.
- 3.11 Besides, there would be significant risks for Beijing in taking up such a role, including the possibility of failure and complicating its relationship with Moscow. Apparently, Beijing lacks the confidence, skills and experiences of a “responsible big power” to play such a high-profile and high-stake role. Xi in his call with European leaders on 1 April expressed support for the EU to take the lead in a peace deal.

Impact on China-Russia Relations

- 4.1 Two broad explanations have been advanced pertaining to the origins of the Russia-Ukraine war. The first focuses on Putin himself — his vision and ambition for Russia, his understanding of history and his past as a KGB agent. The second centres around post-war world politics, blaming chiefly the pressure exerted on Russia from

NATO's eastward expansion after the Cold War.³² The former is eagerly embraced by Western media and has largely shaped the international discourse of the war. The latter is of course championed by Russia with Putin as its loudest speaker. In the West, though criticised as “blaming the victim” and apologising for the aggressor, the same theory had been advanced by cool-headed strategists such as George Kennan, Henry Kissinger and John Mearsheimer, long before the War. Russia did voice objections to NATO expansion incessantly over the decades, during which Russia's relationship with the West deteriorated steadily. It hence cannot be dismissed simply as “Russian propaganda”.

- 4.2 While holding tight its ties to Russia, China still has not given up on the hope to get back on good terms with the United States, to persuade the latter to take a long-term view and have a pragmatic and constructive dialogue, and coordinate and cooperate on a range of global and regional issues. These issues include a post-war arrangement for lasting peace and stability in Europe, and addressing the war's impact on the global economy and trade, finance, energy, food and industrial and supply chains. However, it has apparently accepted the fact that there will be no returning to the past as the United States has determined that China is its chief competitor and an existential threat to the liberal international order. That furnishes the backdrop to the China-Russia relationship.

Circumstantial similarities

- 4.3 The Sino-Russo affinity is underpinned by their circumstantial similarities. Previously, both belonged to the communist camp in the Cold War and neither has fully shaken off its effects. NATO's pressures perceived by Russia are similar in effect to what is perceived by China from the various US manoeuvrings in its neighbourhood in the recent decade. Russia has endured the anxieties of NATO's eastward expansion for 30 years whereas China has to wrestle with the legacy of security pacts, alliances and encirclement also from the Cold War. The *Coming War on China*, a 2016 documentary by Australian-British scholar John Pilger, vividly

³² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/21/opinion/putin-ukraine-nato.html>, accessed 8 June 2022.

illustrates the dire military situation surrounding China.³³ Putin believes that the root cause of the conflict between Russia and the West is that the latter does not wish to see a strong and independent Russia. The same sentiment is even stronger in China.

- 4.4 China has to deal with “the China threat theory” and Russia with Russophobia in their respective neighbourhood. China and Russia both lack affinity among their neighbouring countries. Many fear and loathe them to the extent of finding another backer whenever possible, pushing Ukraine and many former Eastern Bloc countries to seek membership with NATO, and the formation of SEATO, Quad and AUKUS around China. De-Russianisation and de-Sinicisation are common in these neighbouring countries.
- 4.5 Since the Cold War, ideology has become a new feature of modern international relations. It adds a new dimension of “right and wrong” in addition to power relations. China and Russia are under siege for the important reason that they are regarded as on the wrong side of history by being authoritarian and undemocratic. Ideology complicates world politics with moral prejudice. This significantly increases the pressure on China and Russia because small nations that traditionally roll with the punches now have the moral courage to join in to exert pressure, with some even becoming eager instigators.
- 4.6 With Russia being a top-tier nuclear power and China accelerating the build-up of its nuclear arsenal, the two countries enjoy a degree of impunity when throwing their weight around. For example, even before the war, President Biden made it clear that the United States would not send combat forces in any circumstances, lest the war might escalate to World War III. The United States is more likely to engage in proxy conflicts or wars, akin to what is happening now in Ukraine and likely to be in a future Taiwan scenario.
- 4.7 These circumstantial similarities are not lost on the people in China. Domestic public discourse is largely pro-Russian despite general misgivings about Russian aggression and some vocal oppositions to it. A common view is that while the war is bad, there is a need to support Russia because without Russia to hold up the West,

³³ Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAfeYMONj9E>, last accessed 10 March 2022.

China will be the next to bear the brunt. Putin is a hero for many Chinese citizens with anti-American sentiment. They are enamoured with Putin's boldness and idolise him more than Xi.

The Xi-Putin factor

4.8 The close China-Russia relationship, and to some extent China's reaction to the Russia-Ukraine War, is also driven by the personal chemistry between the two top leaders, Putin and Xi, who share the same strongman image and governance style. The two have put a personal stamp on the bilateral relations. Xi Jinping calls Vladimir Putin one of his "closest friends and a great colleague" and at the historic summit in Beijing during the Winter Olympics in February 2022, Putin declared that the bilateral relationship had "acquired a truly unprecedented nature". Xi and Putin have bonded over their shared view of the United States as being heavy- and high-handed, and determined to end the period of US global dominance. Mark Milley, chief of joint staff, stated in his Congress testimony on 5 April that the two states intend to change the current rule-based global order.³⁴ Secretary of State Blinken described China as "the most serious long-term challenge to the international order" in his long-awaited Biden administration's China policy address.³⁵

Short- and long-term effects

4.9 The Ukraine war is likely to have opposite short-term and long-run impacts on the bilateral relations between China and Russia. In the short run, it may have undermined the trust between the two due to China's failure to come to Russia's rescue despite the "no limits" statement on 4 February. While China does not endear itself to Russia, neither is it satisfactory to the West. A united West hostile to Russia and suspicious of China will greatly shape the post-war geopolitical and geoeconomic conditions.

³⁴ <https://www.c-span.org/video/?519185-1/defense-department-fiscal-year-2023-budget-request&live=&vod=>, accessed 25 April 2022.

³⁵ Read the full address at <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>, accessed 3 June 2022.

4.10 However, in the long-run, the strategic situation shaped by the Ukraine war may well push the two closer together, with the isolated Russia relying more on China. Facing diminishing returns from its engagement with a West that increasingly treats it as an adversary, China will also need Russia more to balance against the West.

Tough choices

4.11 The Ukraine war may have conceivably presented an opportunity for China to mend fences with the West, especially when the United States urges China to join the West in condemning Russia's aggression. China is prevented from so doing by two considerations. First, Russia's grievances are basically China's as well³⁶ and second, China does not believe that the West will accept it into its fold even if it fully acquiesces to Western demands. Beijing is agonising over the set of complicated cost-benefit analysis, constantly reassessing how much it can salvage its ties with the West and the cost of unequivocal alliance with Russia. Western policy towards China may well determine the path China will take. However, for now the on-going calculation has left China in a largely "wait-and-see" policy posture.

4.12 Biden in his 18 March call reminded Xi of the vast economic benefits of China's ties with the West. However, as the West is already in the process of decoupling from China in important areas, joining the West not only raises the question of whether it will be accepted in the short run but also face long-run diminishing returns. On the other hand, joining forces with Russia to challenge the existing order would incur substantial costs in the short run while its long-run benefits are uncertain, depending on the shape of Russia emerging from the current crisis. Besides, Russia is widely considered as a declining power.

4.13 The Ukraine war has strained how many Chinese policymakers and thinkers view as Russia's future. "The so-called revitalization of Russia under Putin's reign is based on a false premise", said Gao Yusheng, who served as China's ambassador to Ukraine from 2005 to 2007. "Russia's decline is evident in all areas...and has had a significant negative impact on the Russian military and its combat capabilities".

³⁶ This topic will be dealt with in Part 2 of this background brief.

Gao's comments came at a Beijing seminar in April that was later published by Phoenix News Media, a semi state-owned Chinese television network, as a transcript on 10 May. "The Russian military's economic and financial strength, which are not commensurate with its status as a so-called military superpower, could not support a high-tech war", Gao said. "The Russian Army's poverty-driven defeat was evident".³⁷

- 4.14 The article was taken down within hours of being posted, but the public criticism by Gao is shared by a growing number of Chinese analysts and former officials who have voiced scepticism about Moscow's future as a partner given the military failures it has suffered in Ukraine.
- 4.15 On the other hand, Russia is still a nuclear superpower and has developed pockets of excellence in other areas of military technology. Even though Russia's GDP is roughly that of a large Chinese province, the strategic impact of a Russian collapse would be destructive for China and should be prevented. In essence, Beijing is adapting to the expectations of Western states while also mitigating the risks that China will face if Putin's regime emerges too weakened from its gamble.
- 4.16 China shows no signs of dropping Russia as a partner. The two countries had held their first joint military exercise on 24 May since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, with both countries sending out nuclear-capable bombers above the Sea of Japan, East China Sea and West Pacific in a display of force when US President Joe Biden visited the region.³⁸ It marked the fourth joint patrol of its kind since 2019, with the goal of examining and enhancing the interoperability of Chinese and Russian air forces, and boosting strategic mutual trust and pragmatic cooperation between the two militaries, said Senior Colonel Wu Qian, a spokesperson of China's Ministry of National Defence.³⁹ That raises the question of the prospect of a potential Sino-Russo alliance.

³⁷ Michael Hirsh, "Is Biden missing a chance to engage China?" *Foreign Policy*, 23 May 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/23/biden-xi-china-taiwan-engagement/>, accessed 3 June 2022.

³⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/24/us/politics/russia-china-bombers-biden.html>, accessed 3 June 2022.

³⁹ <https://sputniknews.com/20220531/chinas-j-16-fighter-jets-deployed-in-latest-joint-strategic-patrol-with-russia-1095895195.html>, accessed 3 June 2022.

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