

PRC'S TWOFOLD GAME IN THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR



After our Central Asia publication
“Can Russia find more Friends and supports in War against Ukraine?
Position and reactions of Central Asian Countries”
we provide the interested audience with the compilation of tactical
and strategic narratives coming from Beijing
over the Russia-Ukraine war.



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PRC'S TWOFOLD GAME IN THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

While the entire civilized world stands together in condemning Russia over the aggression in Ukraine and calls [president Putin a war criminal](#) for the crimes committed every day against the civilian population of a sovereign country, there are more and more sanctions coming against those directly involved in war crimes or their allies and cronies from EU, NATO, Council of Europe, individual members states of those organizations, as well as [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#), [South Korea](#), [Singapore](#), [Japan](#), etc. The world's leading economies are absolutely clear and resolute on the Russian-Ukrainian war, on villains and heroes. However, China, as an emerging global super-power, is in no hurry to take a stance and is busy trimming its statements along with the neutral terminology and sentiments of a humanitarian nature. This is evidenced by all the speeches made by the PRC representative at the recent emergency meetings of the UN Security Council, special sessions of the UN General Assembly, or once coming directly from Beijing. Nevertheless, knowing its political decisions and super-power ambitions, coupled with pre-war economic ties with Russia, we can only speculate on how Beijing will position itself in the future, whether it expands bonds with the sanctioned Moscow or stick to maintaining a neutral standing under changing reality. At this point, we see that since the beginning of the war, official China has been announcing the [maintenance of economic relations with both Russia and Ukraine](#). Important to underline, that it refrained from acknowledging Russia's "invasion" of Ukraine by abstaining from its vote at the UN on March 2, 2022 (United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1). Moreover, the Chinese state-controlled media outlets have pushed the disinformation narratives derived from the Russian propagandist sources, to mislead the Chinese-speaking population worldwide.

Meanwhile, we also observe China officially acknowledging the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Ukraine, urging for immediate peace talks between Russia and the US, as well as Russia and the EU. The most recent [Biden-Xi Jinping call](#) on March 18th was yet another demonstration of this two-fold policy or one would say balancing approach of Beijing. Biden warned the Chinese leader to restrain from helping Russia with military equipment, otherwise, it would result in severe consequences for Beijing.

The article does not seek to substantiate conspiracy theories but rather examines existing stand-points, PRC's ignorance of human rights and humanitarian law issues, and its ties to Russia prior to the current war.

PRC'S POSITIONING ON THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR, DOUBLE GAME FOR BEIJING

China and Russia enjoy a wide range of cooperation that has only expanded over the decades. There is no doubt that this collaboration is based on the individual strategic interests of two authoritarian regimes and one general foreign policy goal of deterring their main rival, the US. [Sino-Russian partnership platform varies](#) from the military, economy, and foreign policy to energy domains, and their synchronized actions in IOs are also visible. However, their coordination also comprises some hitches in dealing with issues such as dominance in Central Asia or economic rivalry in the whole of Eurasia. The bilateral alliance carries different weights for the participating parties. For example, it would be much more difficult for Russia to confront the West without Chinese support and we are already witnessing multiple [attempts of Moscow to make China a supporting party in the unjustifiable and cruel war](#)

Concurrently Beijing has a less-dependent approach as it grows as a global superpower on its own and strategically speaking strengthened and rising Russia on its borders does not suit its long-term interests at all. Nevertheless, both sides maintain a stable relationship in the face of one enemy – alliances of democratic states, striving to *establish* an authoritarian rule on the whole continent.

COOPERATION AND ECONOMIC TIES

Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, PRC signed [15 cooperation agreements](#) with Russia, including in the geopolitical and economic areas, followed by [law enforcement, foreign affairs, trade in goods, investment cooperation, agriculture, global navigation satellite systems, gas purchase, and sales, informatization and digitalization](#).



Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping
pose for a photograph
before their talks in Beijing, China.
Photograph: Ramil Sitdikov/AP

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/04/xi-jinping-meets-vladimir-putin-china-russia-tensions-grow-west>

China announced it would allow [wheat imports](#) from Russia, while also signing the 30-year deal on increased imports of Russian gas. These actions indirectly express a certain commitment and faith in Putin's win.

Despite the circumstance that these agreements between the two authoritarian powers were signed prior to the war, and since then, they have been neither rejected nor withdrawn. Even more disturbing is that Russia has initiated [a \\$117.5 bln worth deal](#) with China on exporting its oil and gas supplies. This occasion changes the orientation of the Kremlin's energy market and directs it towards the East, meaning Putin tries to reduce its dependency on European customers. Russian energy giant Gazprom signed a 30-year contract with the Chinese company CNPN and claimed that it is going to increase gas supplies to the PRC to 48 bcm per year, while initially, the plan was to deliver only 38 bcm.

In this hard time for Russia, when China, as its number one trading partner, is almost the sole savior of its economy, Beijing may have other priorities altogether, as their interdependency varies radically. Beijing may consider that its trade with Moscow comprises only [2% of its total trade volume](#), while the US and the EU have larger shares. This occasion, together with the fear of indirect sanctions deriving from the contracts with Russian banks and firms, might deter the PRC from aiding Kremlin.

However, Xi Jinping's reference to Putin as his ["best friend"](#) prior to the Beijing Winter Olympics, and his ["best and bosom friend"](#) even earlier at his birthday in 2019, indicates their close ties. As China has no formal Western allies, it also clearly validated Russia's claim to stop the NATO expansion during the [emergency meeting of the UN Security Council](#):

"China advocates a common comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security concept that the security of one country cannot come at the cost of undermining the security of other nations. Much less can regional security be secured through group strengthening and from that matter group expansion against the backdrop of five successive rounds of NATO expansion? Russia's legitimate security aspirations should be given attention and addressed properly" – said a Chinese representative to the UN Security Council on February 25th.

INVASION AND SANCTIONS

Beijing has avoided using the word “invasion” and seeks a solution that will prevent the West from achieving its goal. *“The party (CCP) has no friends, no sentiments or compassion - it only has interests. The existential one is to counter the liberal West, especially the US, which threatens the position of Chinese communists.”* - mentioned Polish journalist, and analyst, Jędrzej Winiecki, in his article for Polityka.pl. The question today is, whether China could be the one who assists Kremlin to ease the damage coming from the Western sanctions? This question is equally troubling both Moscow and the western capitals. Wang Wenbin, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, highlighted during his briefing on February 25, that official [China opposes the use of sanctions against Russia](#), as they do not represent an efficient way to cope with the problem. During the same, second emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, China’s ambassador to the UN, [Zhang Jun](#), also stressed:



“At present, faced with a highly complex and sensitive situation, the security council should make a necessary response and at the same time such response should be also taken with great caution. All actions should be truly conducive to defusing the crisis rather than adding fuel to fire. If not handled properly and treated by bending oneself on exerting pressure and imposing sanctions, it may only lead to more casualties, more property loss, a more complicated and chaotic situation and more difficulties in bridging differences. It may completely shut the door to a peaceful solution and eventually it is the vast number of innocent people that will be the victims.”

Chinese explanation of the opposition to sanctions is not its support for Russia’s action against Ukraine, but they took more of a holistic approach criticizing Sanction Policy as such well

expressed in rhetorical question by Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman for China's foreign ministry **"Have U.S. sanctions solved the problem?"**. On a regular press briefing on February 23rd, she outlined the Chinese position:

"The position of the Chinese government is that we believe that sanctions have never been a fundamental and effective way to solve problems, and China always opposes any illegal unilateral sanctions," at a regular press briefing on. "Since 2011, the United States has imposed sanctions on Russia more than 100 times, but we can all think about it calmly," she added.

In other words, one might argue that Beijing feels for Moscow and challenges the introduction of sanctions as a kind of prospective self-defense step, but has no intention to rush into helping President Putin to circumvent its consequences either. As Guo Shuqing, chairman of the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission, highlighted **"the country won't participate in sanctions, but he didn't offer any relief either"**. This policy was proven by decisions of the Chinese development bank called Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, (AIIB), **"suspending all its activities in Russia as the war in Ukraine unfolds."**

The ambiguity of further Chinese actions is derived from the fact that, while being in a close economic relationship with Moscow, it officially supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine, claiming that its sovereignty should be **"respected and safeguarded"**. Additionally, Chinese traders are cutting back imports of coal from Russia as **they struggle to secure backing from state banks**. After Russia's expulsion from the SWIFT system, most of the banks, functioning on dollar-denominated contracts, had to stop the payment operations, making it difficult to trade with Moscow on coal. Therefore, trades are on hold until they reach the consensus on trading in Chinese currency.

MILITARY ASSISTANCE

On March 13, Financial Times, New York Times, and several other popular media outlets leaked the information about the **Kremlin requesting military assistance** (including missiles, drones, intelligence-related equipment, armored vehicles, vehicles for logistics, and support) from Beijing in support of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Chinese side has refused the claims calling them "disinformation" spread by the United States, while later on, the same media outlets wrote

about Beijing's willingness and [openness to provide Russia with the requested weapons](#), including surface-to-air missiles. The EU leaders also justified this argument based on [reliable evidence of China considering military assistance to Russia](#).

This occasion worries the US and the EU officials who constantly warn the PRC not to attempt to bail out Russia amid the western sanctions. Washington believes that Beijing tries to covertly assist Moscow, while publicly playing the role of peace-loving mediator urging for the diplomatic resolution of the Russo-Ukrainian war and [small countries to "cherish peace" in the ASEAN region](#).

Another contradiction is linked to the PRC's knowledge of the occurrence of war in late February. [The Chinese Ambassador to the US Qin Gang](#) follows the narrative of China being a peace-maker and claims that Beijing would do its best to prevent the war if the country was aware of such incidents prior to its emergence. On the contrary, media reports stated that in early February, [China asked Russia to delay war until the end of the Beijing Olympics](#), taking into account the previous unpleasant experience in 2008, when Russia attacked Georgia during the Beijing Olympics and drew all the attention of the international community.

CHINA AS A PEACEKEEPER?

RESTRAINT FROM THE UN VOTES

While China is playing a twofold game, the world democracies continue criticizing the PRC for not having a clear position. For instance, Australian PM Morrison disparaged Beijing for the ["lack of a strong response"](#). On the contrary, China not only disapproved of the sanctions but also initially accused [Washington in fueling the Russo-Ukrainian war in Europe](#). PRC's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying, implied that the US was a ["culprit" for "fanning up flames"](#). He made this point due to the US's constant warnings prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Chinese scholar Shen Yi was also extreme in his opinions, [comparing a threat of NATO's expansion for Russia to a 1960s Cuban Missile crisis](#). He stated that along this policy, the US and its partners are aiming to lead the international order.

Later on, China's rhetoric changed and it adopted the role of peacekeeper and the initiator of the dialogue between the disputing sides, while simultaneously and constantly abstaining from voting for the resolution concerning "the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine."

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(Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THDHTlaSb50>)

Earlier, in the end of February, it also joined the United Arab Emirates and India in refraining from the UN resolution on the condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"We must draw profound lessons from the extremely painful experience in the past based on the above-mentioned China abstain in the vote just now. I wish to stress that the issue of Ukraine is not something that only emerged today, nor did the current situation occur suddenly overnight. It is the result of the interplay of various factors over a long period of time." – mentioned Zhang Jun during the meeting of the UN Security Council.

Despite the abstains, the official Chinese representative to the UN continues building the image of the peacekeeper and claims the following:

“In the current context, all parties concerned should exercise restraint and avoid the further escalation of tensions. We believe that the door to a peaceful solution to the Ukraine issue is not fully shot, nor should it be. China has pointed out on many occasions that there is a complex historical context on the Ukraine issue and that the current situation is the result of the interplay of many factors. China’s position on safeguarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states has been consistent.” (23 Feb 2022);

“We believe that the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of all states should be respected and that the purposes and principles of the UN Charter should be jointly upheld. We have always called on all parties to see reasonable solutions to address each other’s concerns through peaceful means on the basis of equality and mutual benefit. We welcome and encourage all efforts for diplomatic solution. We support Russian Federation and Ukraine in resolving this issue through negotiations.” (25 Feb 2022);

“China supports and encourages all diplomatic efforts conducive to a peaceful settlement of the Ukraine crisis and welcomes the earliest possible direct dialogue and negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. China supports eco-footed dialogues between the EU and Russia on European Security issues and upholding the principle of indivisible security to eventually form a balanced, effective and sustainable European security mechanism. China believes that the security council should give priority to regional peace and stability and the universal security of all countries and play a constructive role in resolving the Ukraine issue, actions taken by the UN should help cool the situation and facilitate the diplomatic solution to avoid escalation of tensions.” (27 Feb 2022).

Hence, China has not taken a precise position, as while talking about peaceful reconciliation of the war at the UN, it simultaneously refrains from acknowledging Russian aggression and opposes sanctions. Apparently, China's definition of "peace" is dubious since it avoids the recognition of Putin as a war criminal and Russia as an aggressor state. PRC places itself among such states as India, Nicaragua, Cuba and several others, which refuse to stand along with the democracies around the world.

HUMAN RIGHTS AS A SENSITIVE TOPIC FOR BEIJING

On February 28, China voted against Ukraine's initiative to hold an urgent debate at the UN Human Rights Council on the Situation of Human Rights in Ukraine deriving from Russian aggression.

49th UN Human Rights Council: Supporters of an Urgent Debate on the situation of Human Rights in Ukraine stemming from the Russian aggression



- In favour
- Against
- Abstention
- No Council member

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Created by: Sarah Ultes, Dr. Olaf Wientzek, Data: HRC Extranet

- The UN Human Rights Council in its 49th Session on 28th February voted to hold an Urgent Debate on the Situation of Human Rights in Ukraine stemming from the Russian aggression with 29 in favour, 5 against and 13 abstentions.
- Russia alongside China, Venezuela, Cuba, Eritrea voted against while India, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Uzbekistan, the UAE, Pakistan, Sudan, Namibia, Somalia, Cameroon, Gabon, Senegal, Mauritania abstained.

(Source: <https://twitter.com/aguirreol/status/1498250609404874752?s=21>)

We can say with confidence that Beijing-like behavior is motivated by it to cover up its human rights violations against the Uyghur minorities in Xinjiang. The modern world is well aware of

human rights being taboo for the Chinese government, especially when it comes to its recognition and protection.

Nowadays, there are numerous precedents of how [China oppresses its Muslim minorities in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region \(XUAR\)](#). Human rights defenders claim that the Chinese government has detained millions of Uyghurs in so-called “re-education camps” and imprisoned thousands. They are also alleged to commit a crime against humanity and several countries, such as the US, the Netherlands, or Canada, accused China of genocide against the minorities in Xinjiang. The evidence shows that Uyghurs are also used for forced labor, and their women are being sterilized, sexually abused, and tortured. The [international community has actively condemned](#) these activities. However, PRC actively seeks to deny and cover up such illegal actions, which also explains why it opposes investigating human rights abuses orchestrated by Russia in Ukraine.

IS CHINESE TAIWAN POLICY THE REASON FOR PRC TO ARGUE FOR TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR?

As mentioned by the Chinese representative during the [UN General Assembly Emergency Special Session](#) on February 28: *“As a prominent member of the UN security council, China always conscientiously fulfils its responsibility of maintaining international peace and security. It is our consistent and unequivocal position that all countries sovereignty and the territorial integrity should be respected.”*

But is this really true?

While Beijing is trying to play a role of a peacekeeper in the Russo-Ukrainian war, Taiwan worries about the impending military threat due to China's claims on its territory. Taiwan has transformed into a self-governing state [since 1949](#) and to this day is not under the control of the Chinese Communist Party. Nevertheless, according to “One China Policy”, Beijing views Taiwan as its part, where the Chinese Communist Party must be the only legitimate governor. Seeking reunification with Taiwan, the PRC rejects its participation in the UN bodies and various international institutions. There are only [fifteen states](#) in the world that abstain from recognizing the “One China Policy” and maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

While Russia continues severe military operations in Ukraine, Beijing [keeps violating Taiwan's airspace](#) by sending military aircraft, as stated by the defense ministry of Taiwan. Despite the

frequency of such precedents, Taiwan's concern over these issues has deepened in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, as the security analysts claim that China is monitoring the international community's response to the recent developments and then will decide whether to launch more substantial assaults on Taiwan or not. The official Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying, claims that Taiwan is “not Ukraine” and has been the inseparable province of China, which further raises worries in Taiwan. According to “The Diplomat”, sanctions will not threaten Beijing in the fight for Taiwan, as it has more capability to lean on a domestic market during the economic blockade than Russia does. Furthermore, unlike Moscow’s strategy against Ukraine, China cannot directly cross over Taiwan due to different geolocation and logistics. Hence, Beijing might not use similar tactics but draw more general lessons and identify the opportunities.

However, there is also the possibility that the international community will respond to China in the event of Taiwan’s seizure differently from what we have seen in the case of Russia. For instance, if we talk about the US, what we see is that Taiwan has maintained close ties with its government both during the Trump and Biden administrations. Under President Donald Trump, several official visits and massive military support were unveiled. A similar tendency continued after the change of the administration. "Since Biden took office, the US government has been highlighting the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait in many diplomatic statements that it has issued with allies," - mentioned Bonnie Glaser, director of the Asia Program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States in the interview with DW. Consequently, in the event of ineffective sanctions amid the escalation of the Sino-Taiwanese war, direct US military intervention is not an excluded scenario.

Meanwhile, Taiwan has vowed its support to Ukraine, while worrying about its own fate. For decades, it has existed under the constant military threat of the PRC, as the latter gradually increases its military capabilities. The Taiwanese Foreign Minister, Joseph Wu, assumes that Beijing’s army advancement could allow it to go beyond Taiwan and attack the first island chain. Therefore, Taiwan must be extremely careful and avoid any provocations both of China and from China.

PRC’S DISINFORMATION STRATEGY DURING THE WAR

While Russia focuses on conventional warfare, bombing the cities of Ukraine, China leads the warfare in cyberspace, or is believed in a place most familiar with Chinese tactics during difficult times, Taiwan.

Since the beginning of the attacks, PRC state-controlled media outlets such as Xinhua, China News Service, CCTV, Global Times, Guancha, supported multiplying the Russian false narratives widely distributed by Russian propaganda outlets, such as Sputnik, TASS. The most common storylines are: “The people of Kyiv are quite happy that Russia has invaded”; “Putin states only Fascists fight like this”; “An opposition parliamentarian’s claim that Zelensky had already fled to Poland”; “Zelensky has run away from Kyiv”; “later reports that Ukraine has refused peace talks”.



Moreover, the Chinese state media personalities are embedded to Russian soldiers deployed within the frames of the so-called “operation Z” to implement the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It is notable that the Chinese journalists are interviewing Russian soldiers dismissing the cruelty of their actions. Below, we see the Chinese Phoenix TV reporter in front of a Russian military vehicle and later riding with Russian soldiers:



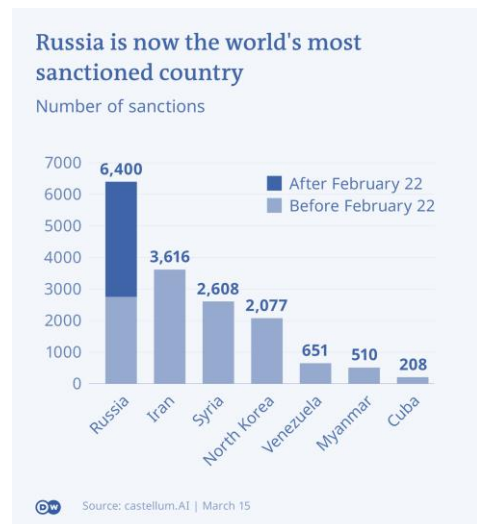
Such actions are mostly typical of the Russian state-run media outlets, although we also see Chinese journalists involved in the process. This circumstance violates the neutral position initially envisaged and taken by the PRC on the Russian-Ukrainian issue.

China's anti-western sentiments are also portrayed on media platforms. The comments promoted are not directly about the Russia-Ukraine war, but about how NATO and the US have triggered Russia to shift into a "self-defense" mode. Hence, there are several stories targeting the West and particularly, the United States in Chinese manipulative websites. For instance, the trending anti-US plots include the following titles: "[the US told Ukraine to light the fire in order to gain international support](#)"; "[Are you still expecting big brother the USA?](#)"; "The US and NATO are responsible for the war". The comments that appear below the Weibo posts citing the Chinese MFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian are also misleading, claiming that: "[NATO will pay for its blood debt,](#)" or "[NATO has no limits, and its aggressive ambition will trigger pushbacks.](#)" The narratives published in mandarin are meant to mislead the Chinese speaking society about the chronicles of war.

CONCLUSION

Since Russian aggression, democracies all around the globe have supported Ukraine systematically diplomatically, politically, and by delivering military and humanitarian aid. For this reason, [Russia surpassed Iran in the battle for the title of the most sanctioned country in the World.](#) We are witnessing unprecedented sanctions from the west and nearly total isolation of Russia and President Putin, his government and his cronies, as well as Russian oligarchs from the civilized world. However, China is not among them, as it avoids naming Russia's "invasion" in a correct manner, refuses to impose sanctions, and abstains from voting against Kremlin in the UN.

Various factors contribute to PRC's silence on this matter. First, we can assume Sino-Russian economic and financial proximity, which has only strengthened with time. Several weeks prior to the war, on February 4th, Moscow and Beijing signed a new oil and gas deal worth \$117.5 billion, giving Russia concrete guarantees to expand its economy to the East to avoid pressure from the Western sanctions. The second point is related to the alignment of two authoritarian regimes against the West, which was well reflected in China's support for Russia's argument against NATO expansion. Thirdly, the role of peacemaker Beijing



created for itself while accusing the US of being the main instigator of the war. At last, its avoidance of Human Rights issues, due to the magnitude of offenses towards Uyghurs, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, etc.

Overall, its official position remains vague and dubious, enriched with various twofold statements. This occasion makes us think that Beijing still observes the developments and will act accordingly, putting its self-interest in the first place. As it seems, Beijing will try to play peace broker for a while at this stage. It suits Chinese interests both strategically and tactically. Such a pace will keep them on a blurry side for a while, as neutrality and no side-picking guarantees access and opportunities of dialogue from both parties, and strategically if it actually manages to bring the parties around the table for peace talks they can claim the trophy of a peace-maker in this challenging times for entire Europe and the world.

This paper is composed before the two presidents Zelensky of Ukraine and Xi Jinping of China [planned talks at the end of March/early April](#). We will provide updates once the content and the results of the dialogue become public.