



GEORGE C. MARSHALL

EUROPEAN CENTER FOR SECURITY STUDIES

A GERMAN - AMERICAN PARTNERSHIP

SCSS#8, 19 April 2022

Russia, China and Ukraine?

Introduction:

On April 18 2022 Russia's war in Ukraine moved to a new phase, with President Volodymyr Zelensky stating that: "Russian troops have begun the battle for Donbas". Russia now focuses on a single front and seeks to establish full control over the territory of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. That same day China's Executive Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng gave assurances to Moscow that "China will, as always, strengthen strategic coordination with Russia no matter how the international situation evolves" while Qin Gang, China's Ambassador to the US, defended Beijing's ties with Moscow, noting that such ties were "non-aligned, non-confrontational, and not targeted at third parties". On 19 April Singapore PM Lee Hsien Loong suggested that the Ukraine conflict has wider ramifications, impacting as it does Russia-China ties and so affecting US-China relations.

The war, its nature and length stress-tests the Sino-Russian "no limits" axis, in which both parties seek to maximize the benefits of the relationship while minimizing the costs of their "strategic partnership". The war highlights the ideological and geopolitical alignments between Russia and China. The axis needs both to function as a strategic counterweight to US and promote an alternative non-liberal international order. The war also brings into focus the importance of structural geo-economic realities, differing national priorities and the inherent tensions in the relationship. These tensions are based on increasing asymmetries and dependencies and the need for China to balance different considerations, not least to ensure internal stability in China itself. For China, although the circumstances and contexts between Taiwan and Ukraine differ greatly (e.g. amphibious vs land warfare), there are some lessons in Russian and Ukrainian conduct that China identifies and likely seeks to learn.

Alignments:

- **Bilateral Security Arrangements:** Russia and China stand back-to-back and secure each other's strategic rear. This has enabled Russia to strip the Eastern Military District of troops to fight in Ukraine. The notion that the axis is not always together but never opposed proves apposite, for now. Though both view each other as useful strategic partners they are both determined to uphold their own strategic autonomy in decision-making and military operations.
- **Diplomatic Support:** China's abstentions in UN General Assembly votes on 2 and 24 March 2022 formally upheld China's professed "neutrality" with regards to the war. However, China will likely seek to support Russia by influencing other states to abstain in future votes. Russia views its diplomatic relationship with China since the start of the war through the prism of continuity with interactions before the war rather than change. Russia's "peace negotiations" provide Chinese diplomatic cover for support.
- **Narrative Support:** Before the war China echoed Russian narratives around "color revolutions" and western destabilization. Chinese state media now supports and amplifies Russia's discursive power, particularly on Chinese social media at state and local level: the Bucha massacres are

“fake”; Biden is criticized for labelling Russia’s actions in Ukraine a “genocide”; NATO could launch missile attacks from Kharkiv to Moscow in 7-8 minutes; NATO “expansion” to Sweden and Finland would be “destabilizing”; Russia’s Black Sea Fleet flagship *Moskva* missile cruiser sunk in stormy seas following an earlier “detonation of munitions” on board; and, the West’s “economic blitzkrieg” of sanctions on Russia had failed.

- **International Order:** China’s interests with Russia are more aligned than with the either Ukraine or the ‘political West’. Russia can act as a self-destructive and aggressive battering ram against the rules-based international order. China increasingly joins Russia in challenging the Western dominated liberal international order, calling for a reformed new order to replace the current and an end to US hegemony. To that end both China and Russia reach out to states in the Global South to garner support for a new global order and avoid the perception of their isolation. China has committed itself to being a global power by 2049. China encourages all developing nations to initiate their own paths to modernization, contrasting this to Western endeavors. However, unlike China, Russia lacks its own compelling vision of the future, a developmental or modernization paradigm.

Inherent Tensions:

- Structural economic realities are evident given Sino-Russian bilateral trade amounts to \$147 billion in 2021, with a 28% (\$38.2 billion) increase through the first quarter of 2022, but China’s trade with the EU and US amounts to \$1.6 trillion.
- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) privileges its own survival and internal stability over foreign policy concerns, particularly on the eve of its 20th Party Congress (November 2022), where Xi is likely to be reelected for an unprecedented third term. The CCP identifies the primary contradiction (in accordance with the logic of dialectical materialism) in China as inequality, imbalances and uneven development. Would greater Chinese support for Russia result in lower prices for Russian natural resources, better enabling China to address and manage this contradiction? Or might such support come at too high a price: secondary sanctioning and the loss of US and EU markets means that China’s economy becomes less modernized (China does not itself produce semi-conductors) and China is less able to both counterbalance the US and address its primary contradiction?
- Currently China has suspended some operations and new investments in Russia, concerned with the effects of secondary sanctions. From a Russian perspective, a slowdown in China’s economy would reduce Russia’s oil and gas exports to China, as well as Chinese investments in the Russian Arctic. As it is, even under ideal circumstances, China is unable to replace Russia’s lost EU energy markets. By 2023 if the EU stops Russian oil and gas purchases Russia must find new markets.
- Far from winning the war in Ukraine, Russia’s military tactical, operational and strategic incompetence are on full display. China had viewed Russia as a major conventional military power, which went some way to balancing out other asymmetries in the relationship. Russia’s military conduct gives pause for Chinese reassessments. An economically weaker Russia becomes a more dependent ally and potential liability for China.
- Red-lines: Although the communique released after the Xi-Putin 4th February 2022 Summit referenced the “no limits” nature of the Russian-Chinese relationship, limits do exist. Xi will abandon Putin if the costs for China are too high.
 - China’s response to “vertical escalation” in Ukraine may be ambivalent: China could find a way to support Russia’s use of chemical or biological weapons, but the use of tactical

nuclear weapons would be too difficult to deny and result in both China and India distancing themselves from Russia.

- The prolongation of the war and its escalation of the war from Russia-Ukraine to Russia and NATO would cause pause in China. These circumstances would likely unify the West further.
- The collapse of Putin's regime would likely prove another red line, though China's fear would be twofold: first, a post-Putin regime may democratize or more likely an economically weak, China-dependent and difficult to manage "second DPRK" emerges - nuclear, nationalist and unpredictable; second, a united West may now look to address Chinese malign strategic behavior.
- From a Russian perspective, if China purchases less energy from Russia then this would break the spirit of the partnership.

Conclusions: Ukraine and Taiwan - Lessons Identified?

- **Diplomatic:** Russia argues that it does not fight Ukraine but rather the US and its allies in Ukraine. China will likely also adopt this narrative: China will fight US and its allies in the region in Taiwan. The need to control messaging and have countries echo and amplify it or at least remain neutral is paramount. China will seek to secure regional allies in East Asia, oppose the QUAD and plans to jointly develop nuclear-capable hypersonic missiles under the AUKUS alliance as part of their perceived effort to create an "Asia-Pacific NATO" to serve US interests.
- **Intelligence:** China's need for accurate intelligence gathering, especially regarding Taiwan's willingness to fight and resist "liberation" is evident, given Russia's failures in this regard. China also adopts a new core operational concept - intelligitized warfare – which involves the use of AI to intimidate/control the enemy's decision-makers cognition and manipulate public opinion. This requires sifting through large amounts of data to identify influential individuals.
- **Military:** China needs Taiwan intact as its eastern coast allow for strategic (nuclear) submarine launches – the first island chain marks the end of continental shelf and deep water. This suggests China may adopt an approach based on covert, cyber, and information war and an awareness of the dangers of overconfidence in technological superiority, in Command, Control and Communications (C3), and combat management systems.
- **Economic:** While Russia and China may be politically aligned they are both more economically dependent on the West than with each other. China will appreciate the need to mitigate its vulnerabilities and enhance resilience through sanctions-proofing the Chinese economy and currency. China will seek to prevent Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen adopting a political, digitally resilient and cognitive warfare strategy akin to President Zelensky and prevent the "Sea Fortress" from receiving support from abroad.

GCMC, 20 April 2022.

Disclaimer: This summary reflects the views of the authors (Helena Legarda, David Lewis and Graeme P. Herd) and are not necessarily the official policy of the United States, Germany, or any other governments.