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How to Make China Help Bring the War in Ukraine to an End

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How to Make China Help Bring the War in Ukraine to an End

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China's attitude towards the War in Ukraine can be described as "pro-Russian neutrality." This awkward stance has gone against high hopes, particularly in Europe, that the war could be China's moment to improve its tarnished international image by condemning Russia's aggression. However, such hopes have been unrealistic, and they have also not been substantiated by policy measures expedient to incentivising China's support.

- Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China has all in all manoeuvred cautiously. While China has lent Moscow its rhetorical support, it has shied away from providing material assistance. This shows that the war has put Beijing in a difficult position, in which it seeks to balance diverging international interests and maintain control over a challenging domestic environment.
- Ultimately, for China preserving its close ties with Russia takes precedence over not exacerbating its tense relations with the West. This is because the Kremlin is China's single-most important partner in its global strategic rivalry with the United States. From Beijing's viewpoint, this rivalry has only intensified further under the Joe Biden administration, which is why it has now become locked in as the key determinant of China's foreign policy.
- As the war is dragging on and might produce a number of outcomes unfavourable to China's own aspirations, the country's leaders have an interest in de-escalation and a negotiated settlement. This does not mean that China would be willing – or well-placed – to act as a mediator. It does mean, however, that China could help nudge Russia towards ending the war.

Policy Implications

In a world of escalating US–China rivalry, thinking the latter will abandon Russia over Ukraine is fanciful. But China is likewise interested in de-escalation. Therefore, China's leaders might still be swayed to play a more constructive role regarding bringing the war to an end. For that to happen, however, European decision makers would need to change course and try offering Beijing tangible inducements instead of solely delivering threats.

China's Positions towards the War in Ukraine – Taking Stock

China's stance towards the War in Ukraine has now commonly been referred to by Western observers as "pro-Russian neutrality" (see, for example, Maull 2022).

This contradictory label indeed represents a good fit for what China has (not) been doing. On the one hand, China's positioning can rightly be termed "pro-Russian." Most important in this regard certainly is that China's official narrative on the war largely reflects Russia's own. That is to say, for China, NATO's eastward expansion – as promoted chiefly by the United States – constitutes the root cause of the present situation. As a consequence, the Chinese side also does not speak of Ukraine as a victim of Russian aggression and echoes Russia's designation of the war as a "special military operation." In addition, China is supportive of a new security architecture in Europe based on "indivisible security" with Russia.

On the other hand, however, China's manoeuvring has likewise seen the country exercise a noteworthy degree of caution, which – at least to some extent – justifies the notion of "neutrality" as well. Most notably perhaps, China could have decided to provide military aid to Russia, as the Kremlin apparently requested. But evidence of such support has yet to materialise. In fact, China's leader Xi Jinping has repeatedly argued in favour of de-escalation and a negotiated solution. The Chinese side has also emphasised that it respects Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity – albeit such remarks may have to be viewed in light of China's own claims over Taiwan.

What is more, since the beginning of the war, it has been reported (see, for example, CNN 2022) that China has also shown restraint regarding its support of Russia in the financial and economic realms: in March, for example, the People's Bank of China allowed the Russian rouble to fall against the Chinese yuan, thereby making Chinese imports more expensive for Russians. According to Russia's finance minister, the bank has also not allowed Russia to make use of its yuan reserves, which would have been a relief for the Kremlin after being blocked from accessing US dollars as well as euros. Moreover, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a Chinese creation, has suspended all activities related to Russia and Belarus. And, lastly, Chinese companies have generally been careful not to do anything that would make them a target of Western secondary sanctions, thereby adversely impacting their business operations. As a result, Chinese companies have, for instance, rejected the provision of spare parts for aircraft, which the Russian side can now no longer acquire from Western aircraft makers Boeing and Airbus. That said, recent reports from late May conversely suggest that China may have quietly increased purchases of Russian oil (see *Reuters* 2022b).

Ultimately, what sums up China's awkward behaviour quite well is the fact that the country has chosen to abstain from voting on recent United Nations Resolutions in the Security Council and the General Assembly to condemn Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. In other words, China does not condone Vladimir Putin's war, but – where possible – it seeks to maintain (close) cooperative relations with the Kremlin. This latter aspect is furthermore reflected by the fact that China has also not subscribed to Western sanctions on Russia.

China's behaviour has given rise to disappointment and incomprehension among many Europeans. But what are the reasons for China's ambiguous positioning towards the War in Ukraine? How likely is it that China will change course and eventually come to side against Russia? And what, if anything, could European decision makers do to convince China about helping end the war?

Explaining China's War-Related Predicaments

That China has followed a course of muddling through demonstrates clearly that Russia's incursion into Ukraine has put Beijing in a trying and complex situation, one in which a number of international and domestic factors pull China in a variety of different directions.

Internationally, there are, on the one hand, those drivers that lead China to not antagonise Russia. To begin with, Russia is China's largest and militarily most powerful neighbour. Given that relations with some of its other bigger neighbours (especially India and Japan) are not particularly friendly, stability along the country's long northern border is of high value for China's leaders. In addition, Russia is China's most important partner on the international stage. The two countries hold similar views on the need to reform – if not undo – the current US-led "liberal international order" and bring about a "democratisation of international relations"; they both share a common perception of the US being a major constraint to their domestic choices and freedom of manoeuvre globally; and, they are united in their contempt for NATO. As a result, China and Russia have in recent years succeeded in improving their bilateral ties markedly, including in the military realm. This in spite of the fact that thorny issues such as competition over spheres of influence in Central Asia continue to inform the Sino–Russian relationship as well. This general upwards trend culminated in a Sino–Russian joint declaration issued on 4 February 2022 – and hence less than three weeks before Russia's invasion of Ukraine – in which both sides stated that their friendship had "no limits" (President of Russia 2022).

On the other hand, there are prominent reasons for China not to further alienate the US and European Union as well as their partners, such as Australia, Japan, and the United Kingdom. China's relations with the West and its allies have been dramatically worsening for some time now, and dissensions over the War in Ukraine have great potential to aggravate the situation even further. Already now has China to deal with increasing reputational costs resulting from its ambiguous response. Many countries around the world are disillusioned with the fact that China's long-held doctrine about "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity" ultimately seems to be nothing more than propaganda subject to Chinese realpolitik. Frustration and anger are particularly palpable in a number of Central and Eastern European countries. As they bear the brunt of Ukrainian refugee flows (such as Poland) or fear being next in line concerning Russian aggression (such as the Baltic states), these countries feel particularly disenchanted with China. This does not bode well for the future of the already-ailing 16+1 mechanism, which the Chinese side has valued as a major toehold into Europe.

What worries China's leadership more, however, is the potential economic fallout from the war. Chinese firms are already suffering from war-related supply chain disruptions and cancellations of export orders, resulting in billions of dollars in losses. Meanwhile, the danger of Western secondary sanctions still hangs over Chinese companies like the sword of Damocles. The US and EU represent China's largest trading partners (only trailing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, as a bloc), and China's economy remains partially dependent on West-

ern technology. China's leadership is apprehensive of the war causing accelerated Western – including further European – decoupling from China, thus also spurring a wave of de-globalisation that could severely impact on China's own need for sustained economic growth.

China's difficult balancing of its diverging international interests is further compounded by an increasingly tense domestic theatre. For one thing, there is the public debate on the War in Ukraine and China's positioning – primarily to be observed on WeChat and other Chinese social media platforms – which has become polarised to a certain extent. While some advocate much stronger and more open Chinese support for Russia's "special military operation," others have come out against Russia or even in favour of Ukraine. Even though the majority of the Chinese people seems to second the leadership's ambiguous approach, particularly its anti-US element (see Wong 2022), the existence of divergent views is nonetheless worth mentioning – not least, as their existence represents a potential challenge to China's leaders. For Western observers, those speaking out against Russia were given a relatively prominent voice through the Chinese academic and policy adviser Hu Wei, who straightforwardly opined in a piece submitted to the American online publication *U.S.-China Perception Monitor* that "China cannot be tied to Putin and needs to be cut off as soon as possible" (Hu 2022).

For another thing, also the broader context of China's current domestic situation should not be entirely neglected in reflecting on how events will play out. Even though not immediately related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, two points are noteworthy here: First, China has been hit hard by the Omicron variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus since about the same time that the War in Ukraine first started being waged. That China's leaders have clung to their "zero-Covid" strategy has taken an additional heavy toll on the country's already war-affected economic productivity. It has also strained social harmony and put pressure on supreme leader Xi himself. This leads to the second point. In the fall of this year, the Chinese Communist Party will hold its once-every-five-years National Congress, during which Xi will be seeking re-election as head of the Party. All of this is of key importance with regards to Russia's war, because it can be assumed that China's currently anxious domestic situation necessitates the country's leaders devoting enormous resources and attention to placating it, thereby also limiting their willingness to make bold decisions on tough international matters.

China's Fixation on the United States

In light of the quandaries China sees itself confronted with over the War in Ukraine, its current approach of muddling through has made a lot of sense from the perspective of the country's leadership. China's manoeuvring so far has not been without costs, but it has, on balance, served the country's national interests – and this is what ultimately counts in its reasoning. Based on this logic, however, it could also be(come) useful for China to abandon Russia if the two sides' national interests are seen to no longer overlap. In theory, this could give the West an entry point for driving a wedge between China and Russia, particularly given the still-existing discrepancies in those two countries' bilateral relationship. Practically, though, such a scenario seems to be quite unrealistic for the time being. The

chief reason for this is the intensifying US–China global strategic rivalry – and how China's leadership interprets it.

In Chinese leaders' eyes, the strategic rivalry between China and the US goes back at least to former US president Barack Obama's "Pivot to Asia" policy launched in 2011, as then subsequently heavily stoked up by his successor Donald Trump. Significantly, since current incumbent Joe Biden took office in January 2021, this rivalry has only intensified further in China's view. Even from a neutral standpoint, it is fair to say that there is nowadays considerable bipartisan support in Washington for the Trumpian, more assertive approach towards China. Consequently, Biden has declared "strategic competition" – embedded in an overarching contest between democratic and autocratic systems – to be the defining principle of US China policy (China Briefing 2022). In particular, the White House has upped its China-oriented security game in what is now commonly labelled in the West as the "Indo-Pacific" region. The US has managed to revive the Quad(rilateral Security Dialogue) between itself, Australia, India, and Japan; it has also set up AUKUS, a new security pact bringing it together with Australia and the UK.

Recent weeks have further demonstrated just how tense the strategic rivalry between the US and China has meanwhile become. At first, in late April, US strategists were in uproar about China's growing influence and possible intentions in the South Pacific, following a leaked security agreement between China and the small Pacific Island state Solomon Islands. Then, Biden used a six-day trip to South Korea and Japan in late May to position against China. For one thing, he vowed to intervene militarily if the latter attacks Taiwan. For another, he officially rolled out the US's new economic cornerstone for competing with China's Belt and Road Initiative in the region: that is, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (see White House 2022).

It is against this overall trajectory in Sino–US ties that the Chinese side has, meanwhile, come to realise that issue-specific tensions with Washington – such as over Taiwan, Xinjiang, and the South China Sea – are but a manifestation of much greater – and essentially structural – problems, ones additionally nurtured by grave ideological differences and deep-seated mutual distrust. In other words, China's leaders now believe that as long as their country keeps rising, thereby representing a fundamental challenge to US global leadership, the rupture with the North American country will be real and actually happening – irrespective of who is, and will be the next, president. As a result, China's leaders have locked the rivalrous nature of US–China affairs in as the defining feature of Beijing's foreign policy endeavours. Every decision is weighed, then, in light of how it would impact on China's wider strategic competition with the US.

In confidential talks, Chinese diplomats and scholars alike have rhetorically asked why their country should side with the US against Russia in the current war. They have argued that even if their country did condemn Russian actions in Ukraine, the US side would not give China any credit for doing so and it would not change the current state of Sino–US bilateral affairs at all. As a matter of fact, the War in Ukraine has rather become another brick in the wall that separates the world's two most powerful countries from each other. In China's ambiguous manoeuvring, the US side has come to see a chance to further lump Beijing and Moscow

together, thereby seeking to sensitise partners – especially in Europe – to the supposed need to more strongly unite against the two autocratic powerhouses. More than anything else, the White House has delivered threats towards China. US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, for instance, warned that Washington was "communicating directly, privately to Beijing, that there will absolutely be consequences for large-scale sanctions evasion efforts or support to Russia to backfill them" (*Reuters* 2022a). The Chinese side, meanwhile, has denounced the US as the main beneficiary of the war, not least because the latter has helped it secure large arms and energy deals with European countries. China has also accused the US of fanning the flames of discontent by disregarding "legitimate Russian security interests" and criticised the White House for not actually aiming for a swift end to the war.

In this general climate, China cannot and will not risk severing ties with its key partner, Russia.

What All This Means for the European Union and Germany

While the reality of growing US–China global strategic rivalry forbids Beijing from abandoning Moscow altogether, that is not to say China's leadership is not wary of the current war-related developments. In fact, the course of the War in Ukraine presents China with yet another challenge. The latter would have most likely benefitted from a quick Russian victory in various ways, one of them being that it would have relieved Beijing from its awkward pattern of manoeuvring. But this outcome did not transpire, and an imminent end to the war remains out of sight. Meanwhile, some observers have argued that China would also gain from a protracted war in that this would distract Western – particularly US – attention away from China and tie down Western resources in Europe. To some extent, this remains true. At the same time, however, the continuation of the war to this day also means that outcomes still possible include further escalation (drawing in NATO directly, or even turning nuclear), defeat for the invader, or a coup in Russia. It is critical to point out that for various reasons, none of these scenarios are to Beijing's liking at all. Like the EU, therefore, China may well have a genuine interest in de-escalation. And, especially given the close personal ties between Xi and Putin, China is in a unique position to nudge Russia in the direction of a negotiated settlement of the war. But China will not do this without itself gaining from it.

Even though Europeans and the Chinese may have a different understanding of what such a negotiated settlement should ideally look like, it is nevertheless striking that European and German decision makers have apparently not done a particularly good job to date of incentivising China to play a more constructive role in helping bring the war to an end. On the one hand, and unlike their American partners, Europeans have invested a lot of hope in China acting as some kind of mediator in the war (see, for example, SCMP 2022). On the other, however, such hopes have not been substantiated with the necessary supportive policy measures. It is one thing that China would not actually be well-equipped for the specific role of mediator: it is neither exactly neutral nor, indeed, experienced. It is quite another – and more remarkable – thing that, like their American partners, EU and Ger-

man decision makers have above all sent warnings to Beijing not to evade Western sanctions (see, for example, *Politico* 2022; *Handelsblatt* 2022). This lopsided approach, however, will not do the trick. It will not convince China's leaders to play any kind of what Europeans would consider a more helpful role concerning the war's end.

It is, of course, correct that EU–China ties have become considerably strained in recent years and that the Bloc is well-advised to generally be much more sober-minded about the East Asian country. It is also almost natural in the current situation that Europeans have, once again, aligned much more closely with the US, as it still is their transatlantic partner that provides the bulk of European security through NATO. At the same time, however, it seems to be doubtful whether it is the best strategy for Europeans to put an end to Putin's war if European alignment with the US leads to ostracising China.

European policymakers and think tankers like to emphasise that China always promotes its own interests first. This is true. However, a related question that is not usually posed is, if we know that, why are we so bad at shaping China's interests according to our own preferences? What is more, there are a good number of European politicians and experts who have lately argued with vehemence that China has got Europe wrong. Maybe this is also true. But is our own China strategy actually any more productive? The recent EU–China summit that Josep Borrell, the Bloc's foreign policy chief, in its aftermath coined the "dialogue of the deaf" (EEAS 2022) is illustrative in this regard. The EU insisted on discussing the War in Ukraine, whereas the Chinese side was only keen on talking about "positive things." Put differently, the latter sought to "compartmentalise" the Sino–EU relationship, whereas the Bloc's leaders rejected this method (EEAS 2022). This fact is remarkable, though, because in the past it was the European side that strongly favoured taking a compartmentalised approach to dealing with China. This rationale has been evident from the EU's still-valid three-tier China policy that describes the country as simultaneously a partner, competitor, and systemic rival (see EC 2019). Where was the EU's "flexibility" on China when it might have once been helpful?

It can be assumed that China's leadership does not (yet) perceive relations with the EU as locked into the same state of rivalry as with the US. Consequently, China's leaders may still be invested in "doing Brussels a favour" as long as they get something in return. Therefore, provided European decision makers would really like to see the East Asian country help end the War in Ukraine, they must (re)focus on a more pragmatic China policy. Significantly, this entails by necessity at least mixing pressure and the threat of secondary sanctions together with the provision of tangible inducements. From the European perspective, such inducements would make most sense in areas where cooperation with China is still generally accepted, such as trade and investment, health, climate change, and nuclear non-proliferation. Discreet support for China's attempts at developing or acquiring more effective mRNA COVID-19 vaccine technology might be a specific case in point here. But Europeans would probably enjoy greater success if they offered China more than relatively low-hanging fruits. A revival of the stalled negotiations on the EU–China investment agreement could be such an example (see also,

Huang 2022). Obviously, that is a tall order – and the release on 24 May of the so-called Xinjiang Police Files, documenting in previously unprecedented ways China's human rights violations against its Uyghur minority, has not made such a move any more intuitive. Ultimately, it is up to European policymakers to decide if the prospect of ending the war – thereby also preventing the danger of nuclear escalation – could nonetheless be worth trying for.

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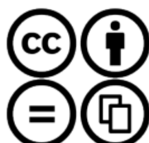

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