

China's Response to War in Ukraine

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Distinguished Co-Chairs and Commissioners -- thank you for inviting me to testify today on how China has responded to war in Ukraine and the implications of Beijing's response for American national security and foreign policy.

Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine on February 24th posed important choices for the People's Republic of China (PRC). China has been actively supportive of Russia in the informational and diplomatic arenas, while its economic behavior has been mostly self-interested and material military support for Russia's war has been limited though routine military cooperation with Moscow has continued. Beijing's stance on the war appears to be determined largely by its perception of the need to counter and oppose the United States and the U.S.-led alliance system; many of its criticisms of Western policy on Ukraine extend and augment pre-existing themes about flaws in the American-led security order in both Europe and Asia. The unfolding of Xi Jinping's Global Security Initiative in parallel with these criticisms suggests that Beijing may be gearing up for a significant attempt to revise international order in the realm of global security, something the U.S. should watch closely. Moreover, although the Feb. 4th Russia-China Joint Statement implied that Ukraine and Taiwan were analogous, Beijing's post-invasion rhetoric has stridently rejected that comparison, even as the PRC observes the conflict to decide what lessons it can or should draw for Taiwan.

As other analysts have noted, the Russian invasion of Ukraine placed into irreconcilable conflict several of China's key priorities for 2022.¹ The most visible of these was Beijing's high-level partnership with Moscow, which was reaffirmed on February 4 and is based not only on close personal ties between the two leaders, but shared interests in energy, trade, and military technology, and common pursuit of an authoritarian political system with power concentrated in the top leader.² The second Chinese interest at play was a set of principles that Beijing has long espoused in diplomatic rhetoric and that were included in the Joint Statement: sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries (all of which presumably preclude armed invasion and wars of aggression). The third major interest is Beijing's desire for stability in the run-up to the 20th Party Congress this fall, when Xi will assume an unusual third term – at a time when economic and political stability have already been challenged by China's zero-COVID policy and slowing economic growth.³ The implication for foreign policy is a need to maintain decent relationships with major trading partners such as the US and the EU, at a time when concern over human rights issues in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and other assertive Chinese behavior abroad, has heightened tensions already.

Describing Chinese Rhetoric and Behavior Regarding the War in Ukraine

China's official messaging and the information it has shared about the Ukraine conflict have been strongly pro-Russia and aligned with Russia's own messaging⁴ – which is particularly notable given the centrality of information strategies to the unfolding course of the conflict. Perhaps the most consistent theme of China's messaging has been that ultimate blame lies with the United States and NATO, because the overexpansion of NATO in eastern Europe militarized the region and precipitated Russia's "special military operation." PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying, for example, asked in late February whether NATO and the U.S. had "forced Russia into a corner" by expanding NATO to their doorstep.⁵ She rebutted questions about the U.S. invoking the principle of sovereignty by saying, "the US is in no position to tell China off," and then argued that "China still faces a realistic threat from the US flanked by its several allies as they wantonly and grossly meddle in China's domestic affairs and undermine China's sovereignty and security on issues including Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan." References to NATO expansion among Chinese official social media accounts during

January-April 2022 far outnumbered those in a comparable period in 2021 (366 to 36).⁶ At multiple points since the conflict broke out, PRC diplomats and state media have also accused NATO and the United States of inflaming and profiting from the conflict,⁷ and China's amplification of Russian talking points has included active promotion of Russian disinformation claims, such as those on bioweapons labs in Ukraine.⁸ China's controlled domestic information space and social media platforms are similarly dominated by pro-Russian, anti-American messaging.⁹

Beyond rhetoric, what of Chinese diplomatic behavior? Bilateral communications between Russia and China have remained robust, including at senior levels. A call occurred between Putin and Xi the day after the invasion, and another took place on Xi's birthday in mid-June.¹⁰ Both Wang Yi and Li Zhanshu have also affirmed the partnership in the months since the invasion.¹¹

In multilateral settings, China's diplomatic actions have leaned toward Moscow, though with considerable free-riding in higher-profile forums. The PRC abstained in the initial UNGA vote (after insisting on removal of Chapter VII language), and in several subsequent UN votes, though it actively voted against the UNGA's decision to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council.¹² In other, more specialized settings, Beijing has been openly supportive of Moscow, voting (alone) alongside Russia at an IAEA Board of Governors meeting that "deplored" Russia's invasion and in opposition to an International Court of Justice (ICJ) order that Russia should immediately halt all military action in Ukraine.¹³ The Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) decision to halt lending in Russia was described by some media as a possible exception to this pattern of support in international institutions, but that outcome likely reflects AIIB's multilateral stakeholder structure – in which the vote share of NATO countries almost equals China's – and not "Beijing's" preferences at all.¹⁴ In aggregate, then, China's behavior in multilateral settings has been supportive of Russia, especially when visibility and costs are relatively low.

Economically, the picture is somewhat more complicated, given that "China's" behavior is an aggregation of party-state and corporate/financial actors. Official rhetoric has stridently opposed the use of sanctions, to a degree that caused friction at the China-EU virtual summit in early April.¹⁵ In late June, the U.S. Commerce Department placed five Chinese entities on the BIS Entity List specifically for supporting Russia's military and/or defense-industrial base after the invasion – but thus far, U.S. officials also say they see no sign of "systematic evasion of sanctions,"¹⁶ likely due to the reality that China's economic interests with Europe far exceed those in Russia and could be jeopardized by intentional sanctions backfilling.¹⁷ Simple self-interest, not solidarity with Russia, appears to be the consistent principle guiding Chinese actors' behavior in the economic realm.

Material support from China for Russia's military has been limited thus far, despite reports of Western government concern on this front in the spring.¹⁸ At the same time, however, the PRC has also not paused its military relationship with Russia, opting to continue with joint exercises in May 2022 during President Biden's visit to Tokyo for a Quad meeting.¹⁹ Signing the strategic partnership in early February may also have been a broadly enabling factor for the invasion, with Putin's perception of a permissive security environment in the Russian Far East giving Moscow a freer hand to draw troops from there to send into Ukraine.²⁰

Understanding China's Motivations & Resulting Policy Implications

Available evidence – including the Joint Statement -- suggests that Russia and China share a view that the United States is not only the main threat to their external security but a threat to their

internal stability; Moscow and Beijing therefore share a common interest in constraining American power in the international system.²¹ Opposition to NATO enlargement – a central theme of China’s response to the war – was a new addition to the Joint Statement in 2022.²² It also stated:

“Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions, intend to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext, oppose colour revolutions, and will increase cooperation in the aforementioned areas.”²³

This language constructs clear parallels in Russia’s and China’s views of the common security threats they face at home and abroad, and outlines the two countries’ willingness to cooperate against “external influence” on their periphery. Xi’s affirmation in June of “the legitimacy of the actions taken by Russia to protect the fundamental national interests in the face of challenges to its security created by external forces” suggest that this plays a significant role in Beijing’s thinking.²⁴ In a Maoist sense, then, Russia and China share a view of the “principal contradiction,” oriented around the need to counter the U.S. and its allies/partners, who ring the Eurasian landmass from NATO in the west to the American alliance structure in Asia in the east.²⁵ It also suggests that from China’s standpoint, there is little to be gained from any effort to resolve transatlantic security concerns; as one state media host put it, “Can you help me fight your friend so I can concentrate on fighting you later?”²⁶

Indeed, in parallel to Beijing making these criticisms of the U.S. and NATO over Ukraine specifically, Xi Jinping also rolled out his new Global Security Initiative (GSI), which he announced at the Boao Forum in April.²⁷ While the GSI is still more a concept than a concrete policy agenda, and as yet includes considerable repackaging of past Chinese complaints about the inadequacy of the global security order and the moral bankruptcy of American security leadership,²⁸ the Initiative nonetheless represents a potential broader Chinese challenge to regional and global security order, and particularly to the U.S. alliance system worldwide. Chinese analysts are already writing that the U.S. approach to national security limits common security to “like-minded allies” and pursues security for those in the alliance network at the expense of those outside it.²⁹

Moreover, Chinese-language analysis explicitly frames the GSI as an international projection of Xi’s 2014 Comprehensive National Security Concept (CNSC).³⁰ The CNSC is first and foremost a strategy aimed at safeguarding the political and regime security of the Chinese party-state -- “the Party’s leadership, China’s socialist system, and the authority of the CCP Central Committee with Xi Jinping as the core.”³¹ The CNSC was also vague when it was first unveiled in April 2014, but over the course of the past eight years, it has provided the framework by which Xi has transformed China’s national security bureaucracy, legal landscape, budgets, and policy choices.³² If that is the precedent for GSI, as early indicators from Chinese-language literature suggest it is, then the U.S. should be ready for a wide-ranging and fundamental attempt to revise regional and global security order to be more favorable to the PRC – an effort to make the rules of the international system compatible not just with the PRC’s external security interests, but its desire for internal regime security.

How has the international community responded to China’s position on the war in Ukraine? The answer depends on which part of the world one talks about. In Russia, China’s position has been perceived as setting (disappointing) limits on the partnership between Beijing and Moscow.³³ In Europe, China’s support for Russia has contributed to a further hardening of many European leaders’ and publics’ negative views of China.³⁴ This shift has produced concrete policy shifts; the new NATO Strategic Concept issued in late June devoted more space to transatlantic cooperation on challenges posed by China than any previous NATO document.³⁵ In the Global South, however, China’s

messages may be finding a more receptive audience, as Beijing has sought to use the conflict to highlight concerns it shares with developing countries while also promoting its own initiatives (GSI and its economic counterpart, the Global Development Initiative) as preferential alternatives to existing international order.³⁶ It is difficult to systematically assess how successful these efforts have been; leaders in Brazil and South Africa have echoed PRC talking points, while countries like India have been much more skeptical.³⁷ Systematic polling data across the Global South remains very limited and, in most cases, has not yet been updated to reflect the impact of the Ukraine conflict, so the answer is, at present, simply unknown. This suggests a strong need, going forward, to disaggregate and systematically measure not only how China's position on Ukraine evolves, but how that position is impacting perceptions of Chinese foreign policy and China's role in Asia and the world.

The final set of possible implications have to do with Taiwan. The parallelism in the February 4th Joint Statement not only primed global audiences to analogize in their own minds between Ukraine in Europe and Taiwan in Asia, but to believe that *China* also viewed them as comparable. Once the conflict began, however, Beijing began to stridently disavow comparability, framing Taiwan as a matter not of authoritarianism vs. democracy, but as secession vs. the maintenance of territorial integrity.³⁸

As various think pieces and panels have considered what lessons Ukraine holds for Taiwan,³⁹ the similarities between the two situations are worth listing. Taiwan and Ukraine are both smaller, non-nuclear powers facing the threat of invasion by a conventionally superior nuclear power. Both are Western-oriented democracies facing authoritarian opponents who seek to revise the status quo to incorporate part or all of their territory and see their independent existence as largely illegitimate. And both are located in regions geographically distant from the U.S., without a formal security guarantee from the U.S. or other great powers to assure their survival. Ukraine therefore potentially offers important lessons on a range of issues: the utility of intelligence diplomacy in strategic warning and coalition-building; the efficacy of particular forms of security assistance; the urgency of getting both procurement and manpower mobilization right in advance of a potential conflict; and the need to revisit and update pre-conflict assessments of the effectiveness of both political warfare and likely battlefield performance (to take just a few key examples).⁴⁰

Any lessons drawn from Ukraine for Taiwan, however, must be applied in very different geographic and political context. Ukraine (pop. 44 million) is approximately the size of Texas; Taiwan is closer to the size of Maryland and more densely populated (pop. 23 million). Ukraine is a land conflict environment, whereas Taiwan would be a maritime one, affecting everything from actual military operations to noncombatant evacuation and humanitarian assistance to logistics and resupply. China and Russia have different nuclear doctrines, at least for now, affecting calculations about escalation risk.⁴¹ And the PLA is also attempting to learn from the conflict in Ukraine – for example, on the need for overwhelming force to achieve a quick, decisive victory – so it is unlikely simply to repeat Russian mistakes.⁴² Diplomatically, there are also significant differences: Taiwan is not recognized by most nations as a sovereign country and lacks a seat at the UN; China is also far more enmeshed in the global economy than Russia, making the costs of multilateral sanctions higher and economic punishment harder to coordinate. Additionally, Zelensky's personal charisma and his appeals to democratic identity will not have easily replicable effects, especially in a region that is far less consistently democratic than Europe. All these factors combined mean that Taipei would likely face an uphill battle to marshal global support.

Thus while it is probably too early to say what lessons Beijing will draw from the conflict in Ukraine, either in terms of military operations, diplomatic strategy, or economic insulation to pre-emptively

counter sanctions, what lessons China draws from the conflict bear close watching. As that process unfolds, analysts should take care to focus on what they actually observe about the learning process in Beijing, without assuming that China's lessons will mirror our own or those of other external observers. Understanding what Beijing learns will be key to effective deterrence and to managing the risks of conflict in the Taiwan Strait in the years ahead.

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