

Russia's War in Ukraine: China's Calculus

China confronts difficult choices in responding to Russia's war in Ukraine. The war presents China with several risks, but China continues to view Russia as a valuable partner. China remains cautious about supporting Russia in ways that would incur heavy costs, such as helping it to evade sanctions, but it is likely to continue providing rhetorical support and resisting calls to rein in Russia.

By Brian G. Carlson

Russia's war in Ukraine will serve as an important test for the China-Russia relationship. In recent years, a shared desire to revise the international order and to reduce the power of the US has drawn the two countries together. Russia has set aside concerns about a potential threat from China, calculating that China's rise distracts the US from Europe and thereby increases Russia's room for maneuver. Similarly, China perceives benefit from Russia's antagonism with the West, which limits US ability to focus on China's growing power and ambitions in Asia and beyond.

Despite the potential advantages to China of Russia's confrontational posture toward Europe and the West, the Russian war in Ukraine places China in a difficult position. Russia's blatant aggression against Ukraine, a country with which China has long enjoyed friendly relations, is clearly at odds with longstanding principles of Chinese foreign policy, including the inviolability of state sovereignty and territorial integrity. China's close association with Russia, which now faces widespread international condemnation for its actions, threatens China with reputational damage and increased international hostility. Economic ties with Russia now also potentially expose China to secondary sanctions. The risks associated with continued support for Russia have led



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping at a summit in Beijing, China on February 4, 2022. *Sputnik Photo Agency / Reuters*

to calls, including from some domestic Chinese critics, for China to distance itself from an increasingly erratic partner.

However, Chinese President Xi Jinping and the top Chinese leadership are unlikely to abandon Russia. For China, the worst-case scenario would be an outright Russian defeat in Ukraine and the fall of President

Vladimir Putin's regime from power. Such an outcome might usher in a new Russian government that was less favorably disposed toward China, leaving China increasingly isolated.

Friendly relations with Russia offer several advantages to China. These include a secure strategic rear, support from a like-

minded partner, and access to Russian weapons and energy resources. China is preparing for intensified strategic competition with the US in the years ahead. Under these circumstances, China's leadership perceives little benefit in helping the US to rein in China's own close partner. China is likely to be cautious about taking steps that would cause undue harm to its own international image and economic interests, such as providing Russia with weapons or helping it to evade sanctions. Nevertheless, Chinese leaders are likely to place a high priority on maintaining what they still consider a valuable partnership.

Untying the Bell from the Tiger

China's actions leading up to and following Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the desire of the country's leadership to offer diplomatic support to Russia while avoiding steps that would harm China. The result has been a difficult balancing act. In the period preceding Russia's invasion on February 24, US officials reportedly shared intelligence with their Chinese counterparts predicting a Russian invasion and urged them to put pressure on Russia to desist. However, Chinese officials dismissed these warnings.

In early February, Putin traveled to Beijing, where he and Xi held a summit at the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics. On February 4, they issued a joint declaration asserting that their countries' friendship had "no limits" and that their cooperation had no "forbidden zones." In this joint declaration, China and Russia expressed solidarity on a range of topics, including both European and Asian security issues. The document made no specific mention of Ukraine. According to some indications, Xi and other Chinese officials may not have been fully aware of Russia's plans for a large-scale invasion. For example, China made no plans to evacuate its citizens from Kyiv and other cities in Ukraine until the invasion was already under way. Nevertheless, the joint declaration expressed China's support for Russia's views on European security, including its opposition to any further NATO expansion. According to news reports citing US intelligence, China requested that Russia delay any military action against Ukraine until after the end of the Olympics.

In the days immediately before and after the invasion, China argued in favor of diplomacy to resolve the crisis. Speaking by video to the Munich Security Conference

on February 19, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called for a diplomatic solution based on the Minsk agreements. Wang also reiterated China's support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, pointedly adding that "Ukraine is no exception." The day after the invasion, Xi spoke by phone with Putin and called for a quick end to the war and a diplomatic solution.

Despite these statements, China took no visible steps to pressure Russia to end the war, even as international criticism mounted and as Ukraine appealed to China for help. China neither endorsed Russia's invasion nor condemned it. In fact, China declined to refer to the attack as an invasion. China abstained from votes in the UN Security Council and General Assembly to

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condemn Russia's actions. China also criticized the imposition of sweeping international sanctions on Russia. On March 7, speaking to China's annual legislative session, Wang asserted that the friendship between the Chinese and Russian people remained "rock-solid."

Days later, citing US administration officials, Western media sources reported that Russia had requested weapons and economic assistance from China. Both Russia and China denied these reports. The US warned China that it would face severe penalties for any assistance that it offered to Russia. During a phone call on March 18 with US President Joe Biden, Xi resisted calls for pressure on Russia and assigned blame for the crisis to the US, citing a Chinese proverb: "Let he who tied the bell on the tiger take it off." During the China-EU video summit on April 1, Xi said that China would pursue peace, but in its own way. European leaders left the meeting with little reason to believe that China would rein in Russia.

In terms of material support, China's response has also been measured. Agreements that Putin and Xi reached during their summit in early February are proceeding as planned. For example, the two countries agreed on the construction of a new gas pipeline from the Russian Far East to China's Northeast. China also agreed to import wheat from all regions of Russia. Shortly after the invasion, however, Russian sources reported that they were unable

to purchase spare parts for civilian aircraft from China. In the technology sector, China's continued dependence on Western technologies was likely to limit its willingness to assist Russia. However, three Chinese state-owned energy companies were reportedly in talks to purchase Shell Oil's stake in the Sakhalin-2 liquefied natural gas project.

Russia's war in Ukraine confronts China with important choices about its future strategic orientation. China appears likely to offer diplomatic and rhetorical support to Russia while remaining cautious about providing material support that could incur heavy costs for China. Such an approach is not without risks, however.

Risks of Sticking with Russia

In recent years, as China has strengthened its relationship with Russia, one potential downside has always been that Russia's penchant for risk-taking, at times bordering on recklessness, could eventually cause problems for China. Russia's willingness to challenge the West and the international order could serve China's interests, but perhaps only within certain bounds. If Russia had achieved a quick victory in Ukraine, then China might have viewed this as a tolerable result. Once it became clear that Russia had failed to achieve its initial objectives and that the war would not end quickly, the risks for China became increasingly apparent.

One risk was that Russia's actions would stimulate international opposition that would eventually target China as well. The war had the potential to revive the transatlantic relationship and US leadership in the world. It could also stimulate efforts by the world's democracies to oppose autocracies. Such developments could lay the groundwork for efforts to counter not only Russia, but also the growing power and ambitions of China. Russia's invasion provoked a strong reaction in Europe, prompting Germany and other countries to increase defense spending and spurring Finland and Sweden to consider joining NATO. Western countries, along with several major countries in Asia and other parts of the world, imposed sweeping economic sanctions on Russia.

The world was far from being united in opposition to Russia, with India and other notable countries withholding criticism and opting out of sanctions. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the international response served as a warning of what China

itself could eventually face. China is already concerned about this. Two years ago, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Chinese government think tank reported that China faced levels of international hostility unseen since the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. If China were to place itself too squarely on Russia's side during its war in Ukraine, then this could cause further damage to China's international image.

Another risk is that Russia's war in Ukraine could turn out badly from China's perspective. One scenario, already mentioned above, is a Russian defeat that could cause the destabilization of Putin's regime or even its fall from power. Putin and Xi appear to enjoy a close personal relationship, as well as similar views on domestic governance and the international system. These are important factors in the close relationship that their countries have built. A new Russian government, depending on its character, might conclude that China's growing power poses a threat to Russia that could no longer be ignored. In this case, Russia might seek to improve relations with the West as a counterbalance to China. Such an outcome would deprive China of its secure strategic rear and create the risk of encirclement by countries harboring varying degrees of hostility toward China.

Other scenarios for the war in Ukraine could also prove risky for China. If Putin were to use chemical or especially nuclear weapons, then China's diplomatic support for Russia could become increasingly untenable. If Russia's war in Ukraine were to escalate into a wider European war, possibly involving the Russian use of nuclear weapons against NATO countries, then China would have difficulty remaining on the sidelines. Such doomsday scenarios would result in a disaster for humanity, including for China. With these grim considerations in mind, some Chinese commentary argued that China should withdraw its support from Russia. An op-ed in mid-March by Shanghai scholar Hu Wei, which circulated widely in China before being censored, argued that China should cast Russia aside before it was too late to avoid serious damage to China's position.

Benefits of Sticking with Russia

Despite these risks, China still had reasons to maintain its support for Russia. Although Russia had to abandon its initial war aims of seizing Kyiv and toppling the Ukrainian government, by mid-April it ad-

opted a new strategy featuring a sustained assault on the Donbas region. The war's outcome remained far from certain, but Russia appeared to stand a chance of achieving at least some of its objectives. Russia might be able to secure a settlement in which Ukraine would accept neutrality, abandon its efforts to join NATO, and recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea and the autonomous status of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in the Donbas. A protracted conflict without a settlement could also achieve Russia's main goal of preventing Ukraine from integrating with Western institutions.

If Russia is able to achieve an outcome that is roughly favorable from its standpoint, then it could demonstrate its continued value to China. Russia would retain the ability to threaten European security, drawing US attention and military resources to Europe and complicating US efforts to focus on China. The prospect of a two-front war in Europe and Asia, which depends on the maintenance of a powerful Russian military, presents the US with a strategic dilemma from which China stands to benefit. The Russian military's performance in Ukraine strongly suggests that many prewar assessments overestimated its strength. However, if Russia is able to salvage its effort in Ukraine and achieve some of its objectives, then the Russian military would continue to pose a formidable threat to the Baltics and other points along NATO's eastern flank.

Even if Russia fails to achieve most of its objectives in Ukraine, outcomes short of outright Russian defeat could still redound to China's benefit. The longer the war continues, and the greater the damage that Russia suffers to its economy and military forces, the more dependent it is likely to become on China. Such an outcome would give China the upper hand in the relationship and relegate Russia to the role of junior partner, even more than it already is, potentially giving China access to Russian natural resources and weapons on favorable terms. China could also become the dominant power in Eurasia, easing the path for achieving its ambitions for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, China would not wish to see Russia weakened to an extent that would prevent it from posing a threat to Europe.

In addition to these strategic considerations, domestic politics in China also provide strong incentives for Xi to maintain

his support for Russia. Later this year, at the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi will attempt to win support for his third term as general secretary. According to recent custom, Xi should step down this year after serving two five-year terms. However, in 2018 Xi secured the removal of presidential term limits, potentially allowing him to serve as leader for life. If Xi were to reverse course and abandon Russia in advance of the congress, this would be tantamount to admitting a mistake. In a system that now approximates one-man rule, such an admission could be fatal to Xi's domestic power.

Reverberations for China

Russia's war in Ukraine confronts China with important questions not only about its relationship with Russia, but also about its own strategic course in the coming years. One important question concerns the implications for China's approach toward Taiwan. Given the two-front war dilemma that the US faces, Russian aggression in Europe might tempt China to seize the

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opportunity to attack Taiwan while the US is distracted. NATO has renounced the option of using military force against Russia in Ukraine, which is not a member of the alliance. However, if war were eventually to break out between NATO and Russia, then the two-front war dilemma would become acute. In this case, an attempt to seize Taiwan by force could become enticing for Chinese leaders.

In the near term, Russia's military failures in Ukraine would appear to discourage a Chinese attack on Taiwan. The struggles that Russia has faced in Ukraine might foreshadow some of the difficulties confronting a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Unlike Russia, which was able to invade Ukraine directly across land borders, China would have to mount an amphibious assault across the Taiwan Strait, which is 160 kilometers wide at its narrowest point, in order to attack Taiwan. The fierce resistance that Ukrainians have mounted against invading Russian forces, as well as the success of Ukraine's Western-provided weapons against Russian arms, could also preview the likely Taiwanese resistance against a Chinese assault. China's military still relies heavily on Russian weapons systems. Unlike Russia in the case of Ukraine,

China would also face the prospect of a US military intervention in support of Taiwan.

For China, the imposition of far-reaching international sanctions on Russia is another source of concern. China must consider the possibility that it could face similar economic penalties if it were to attack Tai-

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wan or engage in other acts of aggression. However, China may calculate that the size of its economy and the dependence of Western countries on Chinese markets and supply chains could make the imposition of such comprehensive sanctions less likely than in the case of Russia. Even in Russia's case, Europe's dependence on Russian energy sources has limited its ability to sanction Russia in this crucial sector. Attempts

to decouple from the Chinese economy might prove too costly to win public support in Western countries.

China will closely monitor the course of the war in Ukraine, well aware that its outcome has important implications for China's own future course. Some Western strategists, reportedly including some officials in the Biden administration, view the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to bleed Russia while also delivering a message to China about Western resolve. In their view, by providing the Ukrainians

with sufficient weapons shipments, Western countries can degrade Russian military forces significantly, dealing a powerful blow to Russia's ability to threaten NATO's eastern flank. In the process, they could also chasten China by demonstrating the costs of confronting the West's friends militarily. The humiliation of Russian forces might also cause China to downgrade its relationship with Russia. Western policy-

makers must weigh such aims against the risks of escalation, especially the possibility that Putin might resort to the use of nuclear weapons. With these considerations in mind, China may perceive an interest in ensuring that Russia achieves a favorable outcome in Ukraine, rather than getting backed into a corner or even facing a humiliating defeat.

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Brian G. Carlson is head of the Global Security Team at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zürich.

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Editor: Fabien Merz
Proofreading: Henrik Larsen
Layout and graphics: Miriam Dahinden-Ganzoni

Feedback and comments: analysen@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
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