

The China Factor in Russia's War in Ukraine

China appears to have growing concerns about Russia's war in Ukraine. Although China is not prepared to abandon its partnership with Russia, Western leaders should aim to ensure that China's support for Russia remains limited. They should also seek China's support in dissuading Russia from using nuclear weapons.

By **Brian G. Carlson**

Russia's war in Ukraine has entered an increasingly volatile phase, with no clear path to resolution. This is a source of growing concern for China, which has attempted to maintain a balanced position since the war began but now finds itself in a bind as Russia, its close partner, continues to suffer setbacks on the battlefield. China has refrained from providing Russia with weapons or helping it to evade sanctions. However, China would consider an outright Russian defeat in Ukraine to be a strategic disaster because a weakened Russia would lose value as a partner. A Russian defeat could also provoke domestic instability, possibly even leading to President Vladimir Putin's fall from power. Considering the emphasis that Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping place on regime stability, such an outcome would be a major setback from Xi's perspective.

China, therefore, has an interest in Russia's ability to achieve a favorable outcome in the war. The road to such an outcome, however, is fraught with peril. In mid-September, during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit of heads of state in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, Putin publicly acknowledged that China had expressed "questions and concerns" about the war. Xi has not explained these questions and concerns publicly, but they may center on domestic

stability in Russia and on Putin's nuclear threats. Despite his apparent misgivings about the war's effects on China, Xi remains committed to his country's partnership with Russia.¹ The West has little chance of pulling China away from Russia, but Western leaders should continue their efforts to limit China's support for Russia's war effort while seeking its assistance in dissuading Putin from using nuclear weapons.

Key Points

- Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged in September that China has "questions and concerns" about the war in Ukraine.
- China values its partnership with Russia and is not prepared to abandon it, but the West should seek to ensure that China's support for Russia remains limited.
- The United States and its allies should seek to limit near-term tensions with China over Taiwan, both to avoid stimulating increased Chinese support for Russia's war effort and to avoid the outbreak of war with China while Russia's war in Ukraine continues to rage.
- China is unlikely to apply pressure on Russia to end the war, but Western leaders should urge China to call on Russia not to use nuclear weapons.



Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, September 16, 2022. *Sputnik/Sergey Bobylev/Pool via Reuters*

China's Balanced Approach

On February 4, Putin and Xi met in Beijing and issued a joint declaration asserting that their two countries' friendship had "no limits." This statement reflected the value that both countries place on this partnership in challenging US leadership of the international order. In the period following the invasion on February 24, China sought to maintain a balanced approach.²

On the one hand, China has offered rhetorical support to Russia. Although China has declined to endorse the war in Ukraine, China has expressed support for Russia's view that the United States and its NATO allies provoked the conflict by failing to recognize Russia's legitimate security interests, particularly by expanding the alliance. China has refrained from criticizing Russia for its actions in Ukraine, including by abstaining from votes in the UN Security Council and General Assembly in March to condemn the invasion. China has also opposed the imposition of sanctions on Russia.

On the other hand, China has provided little material support to the Russian war effort. Chinese companies have been wary of helping Russia to evade sanctions, which could subject them to secondary sanctions by the United States and its allies. China has also been unwilling to provide weapons to Russia, forcing it to turn to North Korea for artillery shells and rockets and to Iran for drones. Despite the prewar declaration of a "no limits" friendship, China has clearly imposed limits on its support for Russia. Reportedly, Russian officials have privately expressed frustration with these limits to their Chinese counterparts.

China has continued to engage in defense cooperation with Russia, however. In May, their air forces flew a joint bomber patrol near Japan during US President Joe

Biden's visit to Tokyo, where he met with other heads of state in the Quad grouping, which also includes Japan, India, and Australia. In early September, China sent more than 2,000 People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers, 21 combat aircraft, and three warships to participate in Russia's scaled-back Vostok-2022 military exercises in eastern Russia. For its part, Russia reiterated its support for China's position on Taiwan, including at the time of US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to the island in early August.

China has also provided a valuable economic lifeline to Russia. Bilateral trade during the first nine months of this year reached 136.09 billion USD, an increase of 32.5 per cent over the same period one year earlier. China has also ramped up its imports of Russian oil and gas, purchasing more than 50 billion USD of Russian energy products since the war in Ukraine began. These purchases

have softened the impact of Western sanctions on Russia's energy sector. Putin suggested in September that an agreement was near on Power of Siberia 2, a pipeline that would transport Russian natural gas through Mongolia to China, but no deal has been announced yet. China withdrew from work at the Arctic LNG 2 project in Yamal and from a planned investment in the SIBUR petrochemical company because of Western sanctions on Russia.

Questions and Concerns

If Russia had achieved a rapid victory in Ukraine, then China might have been satisfied with such an outcome. Following the failure to achieve the invasion's initial objectives and the onset of a protracted conflict, however, the potential risks to China became increasingly clear. The war in Ukraine has negative consequences for China in terms of economic turmoil, damage to its international reputation, and the revitalization of the transatlantic partnership.

China's misgivings about Russia's war effort came into public view during the SCO conference in Samarkand, just days after Ukrainian forces mounted a successful counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region that regained more than 3,000 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory. Putin and Xi met on the sidelines of the SCO summit for their first in-person meeting since Putin's visit to Beijing in early February. It was Putin, rather than Xi, who mentioned China's concerns in his televised remarks at the start of the bilateral meeting. "We highly appreciate the balanced position of our Chinese friends in connection with the Ukrainian crisis," he said. "We understand your questions and concerns in this regard." Xi made no public mention of Ukraine during the SCO summit.

Subsequent events may have created grounds for further Chinese concerns. On September 21, Putin announced a partial mobilization that eventually succeeded in calling up 300,000 new soldiers. He also declared Russia's intention to annex four regions in Ukraine. Most ominously, he reiterated his earlier threats that hinted at the use of nuclear weapons. Following sham referendums, Putin delivered another speech on September 30 to announce the annexation of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions. The combination of the annexations and the apparent nuclear threats led to concerns that Russia might regard Ukrainian counteroffensives against these territories as attacks on Russia's own territory, thereby prompting a nuclear response.

China reacted cautiously to these moves. In response to Putin's speech on September 21, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin called for a negotiated settlement. China, along with India, repeated this call for negotiations at the UN General Assembly. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told Josep Borrell, the EU's top diplomat, during a meeting at the UN that China would seek peace in Ukraine "in its own way." China later abstained from votes in the Security Council and the General Assembly condemning the annexations. China, which has not officially recognized Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, offered no indication that it would support the annexation of the four additional regions.

Avoiding a Taiwan Crisis

Ever since Russia's invasion of Ukraine began, US officials have worked to limit China's support for Russia's war ef-

fort. Biden reportedly warned Xi that if China were to enter the war on Russia's side, then it would risk access to its two most important export markets, namely the United States and the European Union. To date, the effort to limit China's support for Russia has been successful. However, Western leaders should not take China's position for granted. Following the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October, at which Xi secured his third term as the party's general secretary, Xi may feel increased freedom to pursue assertive foreign and security policies.

US military and intelligence officials have expressed growing concern that China could attack Taiwan sometime during the coming years, though most believe that such an attack would not occur for at least two more years. The United States and its allies have a strong interest in deterring such an attack for as long as possible. This effort is especially crucial while Russia's war in Ukraine continues for two main reasons. First, rising tensions over Taiwan could jeopardize the ongoing effort to limit China's support for Russia's war effort.³ Second, a confrontation with China over Taiwan that occurred while the war in Ukraine was still in progress would place severe stress on the United States and its allies.

In recent years, US defense strategists have recognized that the United States would have difficulty fighting a two-front war against Russia and China simultaneously. This problem could only be overcome through a sustained, years-long effort to build up the US defense manufacturing base, modernize the US military, replenish US munitions stockpiles, and strengthen coordination with allies in Europe and Asia.⁴ In the near term, however, a two-front war could arise if the war in Ukraine were to escalate into a direct Russia-NATO confrontation at approximately the same time as a Chinese attack on Taiwan. In order to avoid such a scenario, the United States and its allies should attempt a sequencing strategy that aims to avoid the rise of simultaneous armed conflicts.

For as long as the war in Ukraine continues, sequencing requires an effort to delay a Chinese attack on Taiwan. This effort should include both deterrence and reassurance. The United States and its allies should work with Taiwan to strengthen the island's defenses by turning it into a "porcupine" that is sufficiently well-armed to deter a Chinese attack indefinitely. At the same time, they should avoid words and actions that do nothing to strengthen Taiwan's defenses but could provoke China into an attack in the near term.⁵ The United States should reaffirm its commitment to the "one China" policy

Further Reading

Brian G. Carlson, "Fading or Staying? China's International Standing After the Ukraine Invasion," in: Alessia Amighini (ed.), *The Future of Xi's China: Scenarios and Implications for Europe* (Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2022), 97–113.

Argues that the war in Ukraine could intensify the US-China rivalry and harden bipolarity in the international system.

Christopher S. Chivvis, "Yes, Putin might use nuclear weapons. We need to plan for scenarios where he does," *The Guardian*, 23.09.2022.

Describes scenarios in which Russia might use nuclear weapons in Ukraine and calls for diplomacy toward China and India to seek their help in preventing such an outcome.

Alexander Gabuev, "China's New Vassal: How the War in Ukraine Turned Moscow Into Beijing's Junior Partner," *Foreign Affairs*, 09.08.2022.

Argues that the war in Ukraine is increasing Russia's dependence on China.

and avoid taking steps that appear to undermine it. Visits to Taiwan by prominent members of Congress, such as the one by Pelosi, or by high-ranking administration officials should be avoided.

Avoiding Russian Nuclear Use

China has resisted US and EU calls to apply pressure on Russia to end its war in Ukraine. This resistance is likely to continue because China values its partnership with Russia and sees little benefit in reining in its close partner while its own rivalry with the United States is intensifying. At present, neither side in the war is prepared to engage in negotiations. From the standpoint of Ukraine and its supporters, the time is not ripe for negotiations as long as Russia continues to pursue maximal goals. Furthermore, Ukraine continues to make gains on the battlefield that could strengthen its bargaining position in any future negotiations, even if operations fall short of driving Russian forces out of Ukraine entirely. If negotiations eventually occur, then China is likely to support them, especially if a settlement could help Russia to stave off defeat.

Despite its unwillingness to apply pressure on Russia to end the war, China might be willing to call on Russia to refrain from using nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Western leaders, including German Chancellor Olaf Scholz during his visit to China this week, should appeal to China for help on this crucial issue. For a variety of reasons, Russian use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine would appear to be contrary to China's interests.⁶

If Russia were to use nuclear weapons, then China could suffer grave harm to its international reputation. China, which has maintained a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons ever since its first successful nuclear test in 1964, would suffer negative consequences from the lowering of the nuclear threshold. US allies in Asia might respond by pursuing their own nuclear weapons, further complicating China's security environment.

Russian use of nuclear weapons would also create a serious risk of escalation, with potentially disastrous ramifications for Europe and the rest of the world, including China. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that US officials have warned Russia that the use of nuclear weapons would result in "catastrophic consequences." He did not say what these consequences would be, but the United States would face heavy pressure to mount some

kind of strong response. If the United States were to respond by attacking Russian forces in Ukraine with conventional weapons, then Putin might retaliate by widening the war to NATO countries, raising the risk of escalation to the strategic nuclear level. In such a scenario, China might have difficulty staying out of the war. Even if China remained on the sidelines, the collapse of the global economy that would surely result from a major war in Europe would also have devastating consequences for the Chinese economy and thus, for political and social stability in China.

Russia's growing dependence on China for diplomatic and economic support gives China considerable leverage. Chinese leaders could explain to their Russian counterparts that the use of nuclear weapons by Russia would place China in an extremely difficult position. In the aftermath, China might feel compelled to distance itself. Facing international pressure, China might vote for UN resolutions to condemn Russian nuclear use rather than abstaining. Chinese officials have not commented publicly on the possibility of Russian nuclear strikes in Ukraine, complicating efforts to predict their response. Perhaps China would simply continue to blame the West. However, given China's apparent unease with the war and with the possible consequences of Russian nuclear use, Western leaders may have an opportunity to seek China's support for efforts to avert catastrophe.

Selected sources

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