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THE EFFECTS OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON THE US-CHINA RELATIONS

Abstract: *The Russian aggression against Ukraine began at a time when global tension was already running high. The war in Ukraine, in which there is an indirect conflict between Russia and the U.S. and NATO, allows China to be in a geostrategic position that advances its ambitions to become a major player in the international arena and some experts claim that China is the “winner” of the Ukraine war.*

The war in Ukraine is not over and the outcome of the fighting remains uncertain. This article examines the consequences of the war so far on relations between the United States and China, a relationship deemed by many to be key to future peace and stability.

Keywords: *World order, "Cold War", Russia, China, U.S. South China Sea, Taiwan*

Introduction

Some politicians and experts claim we are living through a new "Cold War" but the global conflict of today can be better described as a new "Great Game".

The world order after the "Cold War" era was designed by America and the West and in the current "Great Game" Russia and China are challenging the Pax-Americana world order. The

United States now faces simultaneous diplomatic and national security crises with both Russia and China.

The war in Ukraine, in which there is an indirect conflict between Russia and the US and NATO, allows China to be in a geostrategic position that advances its ambitions to become a major player in the international arena.

Chinese President Xi paid a 3-day visit to Russia in March 2023 where he held talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin. President Xi has made a strong show of solidarity with President Putin against the West and agreed with his Russian counterpart on shaping a new world order.

Xi and Putin referred to each other as dear friends and promised economic cooperation. They hailed “the special nature” of their relations and described their countries’ relations as the best they have ever been.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on March 23, 2023, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that China’s diplomacy with Russia as a “marriage of convenience” (MacCarthy, 2023).

The Chinese leader’s visit to Moscow came days after the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for Putin for war crimes allegedly committed in Ukraine. The visit also came as Russia seeks to tighten its economic ties with China facing Western sanctions (Asharq Al Awsat, 2023).

On March 22, 2023, Putin and Xi urged NATO to “respect the sovereignty, security, interests,” of other countries – a reference that appeared to echo long-standing rhetoric from both countries falsely blaming the Western security alliance for provoking Russia to invade, (MacCarthy, 2023).

The war in Ukraine can be understood as a part of a global strategic confrontation between the big powers and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine constitutes the biggest threat to peace and security in Europe since the end of the "Cold War." The world’s reaction to it will be a decisive factor in shaping the global political and economic order in the decade ahead.

Russia – US conflicts

President Putin's goal is to "make Russia great again" and a central element of the concept is that a great power by definition has both a sphere of influence and the right to dispose of the interests of other states. The Russian invasion of Ukraine broke the post-"Cold War" territorial settlement in Europe.

Russia and the U.S. have regional doctrines that demarcate areas of interest and influence and both big powers have sought to protect their regions of influence.

President Putin sees the Ukraine war as an attempt to regain influence over Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, to crush its sovereignty, and frustrate its aspirations of joining the European Union and NATO. (Collinson, 2023).

The war in Ukraine has 3 dimensions:

- A war between two countries (Russia and Ukraine) originates from territorial claims, national identity, economic interests, and more.
- The regional conflict between Russia and the EU and NATO regarding the definition of spheres of influence and security and strategic interests.
- Global conflict - between Russia and its allies and the US and its allies regarding the world order and the status of the big powers.

By any measure apart from nuclear weapons, the U.S. is far more powerful than Russia and the war in Ukraine has exposed the myth of Russian superpower strength.

Following the 2022 invasion, U.S. and NATO allies dramatically increased defense, economic, and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, as well as ramping up their sanctions on Russia .

President Biden has sent billions of dollars in American weapons into a proxy conflict he defined as "a test for the ages. a test for America, a test of the world" in his State of the Union address (Collinson, 2023).

The actions that the United States has taken against Russia in partnership with more than 30 countries constitute the broadest set of sanctions and export controls ever imposed against a major economy. But this regime still has its limits, (Swanson, 2023).

However, Western leaders have been careful to avoid actions they believe will draw their countries into the war or otherwise escalate it, which could, in the extreme, pose a nuclear threat.

After 12 months of fighting, President Putin's grand plans to topple Kyiv are on hold, at best. Russia has lost more than 100,000 personnel to death or injury, scores of military-age men and families have fled their homes to avoid mobilization, creating a major brain drain, and Russia is relying on Iran and North Korea for replenishing its diminishing weapons arsenal (Koffler, 2023).

China-US conflict

Since 1949, the United States and China have experienced one of the world's most important and complex bilateral relationships of both tension and cooperation. Similar to the root of the conflict between Russia and the U.S., China also has ambitions to become the dominant power in the world and therefore challenges the world order led by the U.S.

Many issues are in dispute between the two countries, including the economic competition between them as well the dispute over Taiwan and territorial issues in the South China Sea.

The Indo-Pacific region is a complex area with no clear front lines a factor that makes it harder to maintain a stable military balance. China claims sovereignty over the entire South China Sea, while the United States sees it as international waters and asserts the right for its warships and aircraft to conduct operations in the area (De Witte, 2022).

President Biden and President Xi met in person for the first time during Biden's presidency on November 14, 2022, in Indonesia. But the summit between U.S. President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping showed that the relationship between the two countries has fallen to such a low that reconciliation has become difficult, (Hiroyuki Akita, 2022).

Now that Xi Jinping has consolidated vast power at home, he's ready to assert his country's influence in new ways. Yet, direct intervention in Russia's war on Ukraine is fraught with risk

for China, its relations with America and Europe, and the entire global economy (Bremmer, 2023).

Chinese President Xi Jinping said: “Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-round containment, encirclement and suppression of China, which has brought unprecedented grave challenges to our nation’s development,” Xi was quoted as saying by the official Xinhua News Agency (Asharq Al Awsat, 2023).

China, for its part, is growing ever more distrustful of Washington, possibly believing that the U.S. wants to undermine its communist regime (Hiroyuki Akita, 2022).

A State Department spokesperson, Ned Price, responded by saying Washington wants to “coexist responsibly” within the global trade and political system and has no intention of suppressing China. “This is not about containing China. This is not about suppressing China. This is not about holding China back,” Price said in Washington. “We want to have that constructive competition that is fair” and “doesn’t veer into that conflict” (Asharq Al Awsat, 2023).

President Biden, who has framed much of his foreign policy on the assumption that the key strategic question of the current century will be the challenge from Beijing, has repeatedly stressed that he wants “competition, not conflict” with China. But he is also adamant that the US will challenge what it sees as China’s aspirations (Collinson, 2023).

China is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it (Collinson, 2023).

China is the world's second-largest economy, and the Japan Center for Economic Research estimates that China will surpass the U.S. in the nominal gross domestic product in 2033 (Hiroyuki Akita, 2022). The U.S. and Chinese economies are entwined. Americans and the Chinese have a huge incentive to stop their differences from spilling over because both would pay an enormous economic price for any armed military clash (Collinson, 2023).

The support of China to Russia during the war in Ukraine

China and Russia struck a "no limits" partnership in February 2022, when Putin was visiting Beijing for the opening of the Winter Olympics, weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine, and the two sides have continued to reaffirm the strength of their ties.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, China's leaders attempted to balance two fundamentally irreconcilable interests. First, they aimed to bolster China's entente with Russia to counterbalance American power and alleviate growing strategic pressure from the West. Second, although they backed Moscow, they sought to avoid unilateral and coordinated sanctions aimed at China's government, companies, and financial institutions (Feigenbaum and Szubin,2023).

Beijing has remained officially unaligned in the war. Yet China, along with other countries has stepped in to supply Russia with large volumes of products that either civilians or armed forces could use, including raw materials, smartphones, vehicles and computer chips (Swanson, 2023).

The Biden administration's focus is increasingly shifting to the role that China has played in supplying Russia with goods that have both civilian and military uses. As one of the world's biggest manufacturers of products like electronics, drones and vehicle parts, China has proved to be a particularly crucial economic partner for Russia (Swanson, 2023).

Top U.S. officials warned their Chinese counterparts against supporting Russia's war effort after the invasion of Ukraine last year, saying there would be firm consequences.

While China has been careful not to cross that line, it has provided support for Russia in other ways, including through active trade in certain goods (Swanson, 2023).

As Russia's trade with Western countries fell on sanctions related to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, China became, by far and away, its most important trading partner. China's trade with Russia hit a record 1.28 trillion yuan (\$190 billion) last year - a 30% increase on the year before and Russian imports from China increased by 13% to \$76bn and its exports to China increased by 43% to \$114bn (Realty,2023).

Almost half of all the Russian government's annual revenues come from oil and gas, and its sales to EU countries have plummeted over the past year as sanctions bite (Realty,2023).

Russia exported twice as much liquid petroleum gas (LPG) to China in 2022 than it did the year before. China's imports of Russian natural gas through the Power of Siberia pipeline have risen by at least 50 percent in 2022, according to Russia's top producer, Gazprom. China's Russian crude oil imports expanded more than 10 percent last year at nearly 80 million tons (Realty,2023).

The United States has cracked down on some of the companies and organizations providing goods and services to Russia. But shipments from China to Russia of minerals and chemicals used in the production of missile casings, bullets, explosives, and propellants have increased (Swanson, 2023).

On March 23, 2023, during the visit of President Xi to Russia, President Putin said that Russia, China and Mongolia had reached agreements on the completion of a pipeline to bring Russian gas to China and that Russia would deliver at least 98 billion cubic meters of gas to China by 2030. (Asharq Al Awsat, 2023). President Xi did not explicitly mention the pipeline in his comments at the briefing, which Russia has touted as a replacement for the now-defunct Nord Stream 2 line delivering gas into Europe (MacCarthy, 2023).

China will almost certainly gain economically from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, at least in the short term. However, the resulting global upheaval will force China to navigate a considerably more challenging external environment if it is to continue its economic rise.

The threat of Chinese arms supply to Russia

In March 2023 President Biden said that China has not yet sent weapons to Russia to replenish stockpiles that have been exhausted due to Moscow's war in Ukraine. "I've been hearing now for the past three months (that) China is going to provide significant weapons to Russia... They haven't yet. Doesn't mean they won't but they haven't yet," Biden told a news conference during a visit to Canada (Al Jazeera, 2023).

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said on March 13, 2023, that relations between Russia and China were a major factor supporting global stability in the world today. "Bilateral relations between our countries have reached a new, unprecedented level and have become a major factor supporting global stability in the face of increasing geopolitical tensions in the world," TASS

reported Shoigu as saying in a telegram message to Zhang Youxia, vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission and a close ally of Chinese President Xi Jinping (Asharq Al Awsat, 2023).

Russia and China pledged to “further deepen military mutual trust,” citing strengthening their military exchanges and cooperation and regularly organizing joint maritime and aerial patrols. The two countries have continued running joint drills around the world since the war began, (MacCarthy, 2023).

While there is no clear evidence that China has given weapons and ammunition to Russia, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken warned that China may be preparing to do so, (Swanson, 2023). Blinken has said that China would cross a red line if it provided substantial military support to Russia. He told lawmakers on March 22, 2023, that China thus far has not provided military assistance to Moscow despite ramping up diplomatic support, (Radio Liberty, 2023).

Direct accusations from senior U.S. officials that China is considering the idea make clear that Washington is watching closely and that serious consequences will come if China presses ahead (Bremmer, 2023).

Beijing is unlikely to send Russia weapons or ammunition, but it surely hopes the threat alone will move NATO to push Ukraine to the negotiating table (Bremmer, 2023).

China shipped \$23 million worth of drones and \$33 million worth of certain aircraft and spacecraft parts to Russia last year, up from zero the prior year, according to the group’s data (Swanson, 2023).

China is playing a dangerous game. Any provision of weapons to Russia would instantly make an already fractious U.S.-China relationship much worse (Bremmer, 2023).

The peace plan of China

Now that President Xi Jinping has consolidated vast power at home, he’s ready to assert his country’s influence in new ways. One of them is the new peace initiative.

In recent months, China had appeared to position itself as a peace broker. The Chinese Foreign Ministry released a statement listing Beijing's position on a political settlement to the war in Ukraine, where 12 points were listed, including respecting the sovereignty of all countries, ceasing hostilities, resuming peace talks, and resolving the humanitarian crisis in the region (Ministry of foreign affairs of PRC, 2023).

The Chinese peace plan - calls for formal respect for Ukraine's sovereignty, protections for Ukrainian civilians, an end to interference with the flow of humanitarian aid into the country, and condemnation of the possible use of nuclear weapons. The plan also reflects the views of those around the world whose primary interest in the war is economic, by calling for a ceasefire, an end to sanctions, and the opening of peace talks that might help ease pressure on food and fuel prices, (Bremmer, 2023). But China's 12-point plan has no specific details on how to end the war.

China's peace plan allows Xi to interact with Putin—and to visit Moscow as a mediator rather than as an ally (Bremmer, 2023). President Putin had praised Xi for the peace plan he proposed and said that “many of the provisions” could be “taken as the basis” for a peaceful settlement in Ukraine and he blamed Kyiv and the West for rejecting it, (MacCarthy, 2023).

China's peace proposal in Ukraine demonstrates the degree to which Beijing and Moscow remain in full coordination (Cropsey,2023).

The proposal has been viewed as a nonstarter in the West and Ukraine because it includes no provision that Moscow withdraws its troops from Ukrainian land. U.S. NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said that if China wants to be helpful, it should be urging President Putin to get out of Ukraine (Asharq Al Awsat, 2023). The West sees China's peace plan as a ploy to buy Putin time to regroup his forces and solidify his grip on occupied land.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that Kyiv has invited China to talks and is waiting for an answer from Beijing, (Asharq Al Awsat, 2023). But President Zelensky said a ceasefire would “simply freeze” the conflict, giving Russia time to “prepare and come back again with their single wish, the wish of their leader - that is to occupy our country,” (MacCarthy, 2023).

American and European policymakers should note China's carefully calibrated language, intended to drive fissures between the U.S. and its Western allies. China may be hoping to drive political wedges within America and Europe by creating an "off-ramp" for those on both sides of the Atlantic who question the wisdom of an open-ended war in Ukraine (Cropsey,2023).

The Chinese national security Vs American national security

President Xi laid out a program to make China dominant in 10 key fields from integrated circuits to aerospace. He made a series of calls to accelerate the build-up of self-reliance in science and technology, bolster strategic capabilities in emergency fields, make industrial and supply chains more resilient and make national reserves - "more capable of safeguarding national security."

Xi also mentioned the need for "achieving the goals for the centenary of the PLA in 2027," a date by which, according to some US observers, China intends to have the capability of conquering Taiwan by military means (Asharq Al Awsat, 2023).

China's defense budget has roughly doubled over the past decade, allowing it to maintain the world's largest standing military, with 2 million members, the world's largest navy by several ships, and the largest missile and aviation forces in the Indo-Pacific (Asharq Al Awsat, 2023).

The Biden administration's National Security Strategy, published in October 2022, has three pillars: investing in domestic industry, technology, and infrastructure; aligning with allies and partners to oppose China's increasing aggression; and competing with China globally. The Biden administration's strategy said: "Beijing has ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world's leading power," (National Security Strategy, 2022).

Summary

The war in Ukraine can be understood as a part of a global strategic confrontation between the big powers and Russia's invasion of Ukraine constitutes the biggest threat to peace and security in Europe since the end of the "Cold War."

The strategic goal of China and Russia is to shift the existing world order. In their joint statement in March 2023, the two leaders called for promoting a “multipolar world.”

China’s grand plan is to become the dominant world power replacing the United States both economically and militarily. The war in Ukraine, in which there is an indirect conflict between Russia and the US and NATO, allows China to be in a geostrategic position that advances its ambitions to become a major player in the international arena and some experts claim that China is the “winner” of the Ukraine war.

Now that President Xi Jinping has consolidated vast power at home, he’s ready to assert his country’s influence in new ways. One of them is the new peace initiative.

China’s peace proposal in Ukraine demonstrates the degree to which Beijing and Moscow remain in full coordination and it has been viewed as a nonstarter in the West and Ukraine because it includes no provision that Moscow withdraws its troops from Ukrainian land. The West sees China’s peace plan as a ploy to buy Putin time to regroup his forces and solidify his grip on occupied land.

A year after the start of the war in Ukraine, China seems to have gained a series of military, economic and strategic advantages.

In the military field - China is learning the lessons of the war in the use of force, advanced technologies, logistical constraints and more. Since Russia operates weapons similar to those in China's possession, while Ukraine operates advanced Western equipment, China can comparatively study the performance and capabilities of both "Eastern" versus "Western" equipment.

Before the war in Ukraine, Russia was the second-largest arms exporter in the world after the U.S. The war in Ukraine forces Russia to transfer most of the military equipment it produces to the Russian army in the war.

As a result, Russia is having difficulty complying with existing arms sales agreements. China is a preferred alternative by many countries as a source for purchasing military equipment that Russia cannot currently provide.

China will almost certainly gain economically from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, at least in the short term. Because of the sanctions imposed by the US and EU countries on Russia, China is Russia's main customer for oil and gas and at attractive prices.

China's trade with Russia hit a record 1.28 trillion yuan (\$190 billion) last year, as Russia's imports from the European Union fell on sanctions related to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

China's imports of Russian natural gas have risen by at least 50 percent in 2022 and China's Russian crude oil imports expanded by more than 10 percent in last year at nearly 80 million tons.

The U.S. apparently thinks China is trying to replace it as the world's most powerful nation by weakening Washington's influence. A State Department spokesperson, Ned Price, said that Washington wants to "coexist responsibly" within the global trade and political system and has no intention of suppressing China. The U.S. and EU reaction to the Chinese challenge will be a decisive factor in shaping the global political and economic order in the decade ahead.

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