

CHINA’S “FORMAL NEUTRALITY” ON THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR: IMPLICATIONS FOR UKRAINE

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I. SITUATION ASSESSMENT

After Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and occupation of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014, China maintained a formally neutral position: it continued to recognise Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders, periodically declared support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and Chinese state companies maintained no presence in the occupied Ukrainian territories. At the same time, Beijing did not condemn Russia’s aggressive actions, almost always voted against Ukrainian resolutions at the UN on Russian aggression, and strengthened its partnership with Russia.

This approach allowed China to maintain relations and develop partnerships simultaneously with both Russia and Ukraine. For Kyiv, this position was acceptable, and in 2019 China became the first trading partner of Ukraine among the states; cooperation in the defence and industrial complex continued; and the Ukrainian leadership viewed China as a promising source of investment (despite their low share in the Ukrainian economy)¹.

After the start of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022, China generally continued to adhere to its formally neutral stance (most Western experts call it “pro-Russian neutrality,” while in Russian expert circles it is referred to as “Russia-friendly neutrality”), without giving so-called material assistance to either side of the conflict². However, Beijing has substantially deepened the Russian vector of its foreign policy. In particular, immediately prior to the full-scale invasion China signed a “Joint Statement on the International

¹ Dmytro Horiunov, Bohdan Prokhorov, and Hanna Sakhno, “China’s Economic Footprint in Ukraine,” Center for Economic Strategy (in Ukrainian), 2021, <https://ces.org.ua/chinese-money-in-ukraine/>.

² Hereinafter material assistance refers to military and military-technical assistance.

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Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development”³ with Russia, in which it declared “friendship with Russia without limits or forbidden areas”; supported Russia in “forming long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe” and ensuring “joint, indivisible, comprehensive and sustainable security”; and opposed the so-called further enlargement of NATO⁴.

Right after the invasion on 24 February 2022, China put the blame for the “Ukrainian crisis” entirely on the U.S. and NATO, which had provoked the conflict through their irresponsible policies; argued that Russia’s “legitimate security concerns” should be considered; constantly criticised the sanctions imposed on Russia, saying that they hurt the global economy; opposed providing Ukraine with Western weapons since “they do not solve the conflict but only add fuel to the fire”; intensified pro-Russian propaganda at the level of officials and Chinese- and English-language media.

In addition, China has repeatedly disseminated blatant disinformation regarding Ukraine, such as about the activities of the so-called 20 U.S. biolaboratories⁵ in Ukraine, where biological weapons are allegedly being developed (which became one of the narratives of Russian propaganda and part of the justification for the invasion), and about the resurgence of Nazism in Ukraine⁶. China also questioned Russian involvement in the war crimes in Bucha during the UN Security Council meeting in April 2022⁷.

In addition, Beijing significantly deepened economic ties and increased energy purchases from Russia (which lends considerable economic support to the Russian political regime); began work on new gas pipelines from Russia to the PRC; strengthened political and military cooperation and diplomatic coordination with Moscow; opposed Russia’s exclusion from the G20 and voted against removing Russia from the Human Rights Council at the UN.

³ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” (in Russian), <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

⁴ These theses are in line with Russia’s December 2022 demands to the U.S. and NATO to guarantee security in the European region. See https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1790809/.

⁵ “China Urges U.S. to Release Details of Bio-Labs in Ukraine”, <https://english.news.cn/northamerica/20220308/cf0d75294eb649f098f33dcde4a01495/c.html>.

⁶ Jerry Yu. “Analysis: How Ukraine has been Nazified in the Chinese Information Space?”, 2022, <https://medium.com/doublethinklab/analysis-how-ukraine-has-been-nazified-in-chinese-information-space-81ce236f6a55>.

⁷ “China Urged to Refrain from Groundless Accusations about Bucha,” (in Russian), <https://ria.ru/20220405/bucha-1781966222.html>.

II. PROJECTIONS (PERSPECTIVES)

It is most likely that China will generally continue its so-called ‘pro-Russian neutrality,’ due to the importance for the PRC of maintaining its relations with both the West and Russia at the same time. Partnership with the West is crucial for China to pursue its strategic goal of achieving global leadership, as the U.S. and EU market and access to technology play a key role for China’s economic growth and technological development, while Beijing’s so-called material assistance to Moscow would create serious threats of Chinese companies falling under sanctions and lead to the erosion of economic relations with the West.

Conversely, China’s predictable and stable relations with Russia, mutual political and diplomatic support, and military-technical cooperation are necessary for Beijing to win the so-called strategic competition with the United States, in which Moscow is seen by Beijing as an important situational partner. In this regard, for now the probability of a significant change in China’s current position is assessed as low.

The above is confirmed by the results of a series of discussions with both Western and Chinese experts. Particularly, the findings of the closed-format round table held in Warsaw in May 2022 with the participation of leading experts close to the governments of EU and NATO regarding China’s possible actions under three scenarios of Russia-Ukraine war (Russia loses; Ukraine loses and is occupied by Russia; war goes into protracted phase with Ukraine losing some territories and Russia consolidating there) brought to the conclusion that in any of the three scenarios China is unlikely to substantially change its current position on the Russia-Ukraine war⁸. Beijing may adapt somewhat to the changing situation (rhetorically, economically), but it will not disrupt its relations with Russia. Also scarcely probable is the provision of so-called “material assistance” from China to Russia, in particular arms supplies, which would markedly shift the balance of power in Russia’s favor. At the same time, limited military-technical assistance (equipment, ammunition, hardware, provision of intelligence information) from China to Russia is not excluded and is rather likely.

Chinese experts, in general, confirm the foregoing assessments: in private discussions, employees of leading Chinese think tanks, close to the government, noted that Beijing will adhere to the “golden mean,” not directly supporting any of the parties to the conflict. They characterize stable and partnership relations with Russia as extremely important for Chinese national interests, so China will not take any steps that could undermine them. “China and Russia are two great powers, and both countries have a common understanding that “when two tigers fight, at least one will be wounded,” said a Chinese expert from a think tank affiliated with China’s Ministry of Defense. He added: “China and Russia have formed a new type of relationship based on friendship, good neighborliness and mutual respect. This decision is also grounded on historical experience, when China and the Soviet Union had a

⁸ Source: results of a discussion with experts from the EU and NATO countries, May 2022.

contradiction, which led to a military conflict. Therefore, China is trying to prevent contradictions with Russia.”⁹

During another event, the Chinese side expressed sympathy for Russia's policies and compared the situation to the one in China. In particular, Chinese analysts reported that the dominant view among Chinese experts is that “China and Russia have benefitted a lot from cooperation with the West, but Russia and China feel very resentful and humiliated because they do not have a sufficient role in the world,” “they feel excluded and ignored.” Because of this, Russia is seen as a country that suffers pressure coming from NATO, and defends its national interests similar to those of China. In this regard, despite the fact that China incurs considerable economic losses and image risks due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Beijing will not do anything that could damage its relations with Moscow¹⁰.

The aforesaid suggests that China will most probably not provide Russia with military and technical support and will be cautious in helping it circumvent sanctions, but will assist Russia informationally, diplomatically, economically and partially technologically. In this aspect, it should be noted that China's calls not to provide weapons to Ukraine and to lift the sanctions imposed on Russia, do not weaken EU and NATO support for Ukraine so far, while at the same time strengthen Russia's narrative in the world. In addition, China's economic support bolsters the resilience of the Russian economy in the face of sanctions, as it partially compensates for the loss of EU markets and allows Russia to obtain some of the goods and technology it needs from or through China.

China's fear of spoiling relations with Russia plays an integral role in deterring it from taking steps that Moscow would perceive as unfriendly, so one should not expect China's position to be more favorable to Ukraine. For this reason, it is unlikely that China will become a guarantor of Ukraine's security or put pressure on Russia to stop the war, so Kyiv's calls to Beijing on these issues will not yield results. This is proven to be true by the absence of the Chinese response to the appeal of Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in April 2022 in an interview to the Chinese state agency Xinhua¹¹, asking China to become a guarantor of security, as well as to calls of Volodymyr Zelenskyi in August 2022, through a publication in the Hong Kong newspaper South China Morning Post¹², to hold direct talks between the Chinese and Ukrainian leaders and put pressure on Russia. As of this writing, there has been no official response from China about its willingness to be a security guarantor and no direct talks with the Ukrainian side. Moreover, during the daily press conference, Chinese Foreign Ministry Speaker Hua Chunying actually evaded a direct answer when asked by a journalist about the possibility of talks between the Ukrainian and Chinese leaders. She said that China maintains close communication with Ukraine and other

⁹ Source: results of discussion with Chinese experts, July 2022.

¹⁰ Source: results of discussion with Chinese experts, June 2022.

¹¹ “Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Dmytro Kuleba Gave an Exclusive Interview to Xinhua,” (in Chinese), http://www.news.cn/world/2022-04/30/c_1128610853.htm.

¹² “Volodymyr Zelensky Seeking ‘Direct Talks’ with China’s Xi Jinping to Help End Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3187580/volodymyr-zelensky-seeking-direct-talks-chinas-xi-jinping-help>.

parties to the Ukrainian crisis¹³. In this aspect, it should be noted that in Chinese expert and media discourse Ukraine is not perceived as an independent player with its own national interests, but rather described as a “bridge between the West and the East,” a zone of exclusive Russian influence that is temporarily under the control of the West.

In addition, China is increasing its political support for Russia’s actions, at least at the level of rhetoric. This can be confirmed by the speech of Li Zhanshu, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, at a meeting with faction leaders of the Russian State Duma on September 9, 2022, during which he expressed support for “measures taken by Russia to protect its key interests,” recalling Ukraine in the process. “On issues of vital Russian interests, we always provide our support and our understanding. For example, with regard to Ukraine,” Li Zhanshu said, “We see the U.S. and its NATO allies building up their presence around Russia’s perimeter, seriously threatening the national security and the security of Russians’ lives. We are fully sympathetic to all measures that Russia is taking to protect such key interests, and we provide our assistance.” The Chinese official added that “Russia was put in a desperate situation over the Ukrainian issue. And in these circumstances, Russia made an important choice to fight back resolutely.”¹⁴ The Chinese official’s remarks stand in stark contrast to preliminary statements from the Chinese side, in which China advocated a peaceful resolution of the conflict and Chinese leader Xi Jinping stated that “the crisis in Ukraine is not what we want to see.”¹⁵

China’s engagement in efforts to increase Russia’s global isolation also remains doubtful. China categorically opposes the expulsion of the Russian Federation from international organizations, provides indirect international support through attending international events organized by Moscow; and has ensured the participation of its military in the joint strategic exercise “Vostok-2022” with Russia. Moreover, the Chinese leader maintains close coordination and holds personal meetings with Putin (a meeting between the leaders of Russia and China is scheduled for September 2022 during the SCO summit in Uzbekistan).

¹³ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on August 4, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202208/t20220805_10734891.html.

¹⁴ “The PRC Has Stated that It Fully Understands Russia’s Defense of Its Interests in Ukraine,” (in Russian), <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/15706589/amp>.

¹⁵ “China about the War in Ukraine: This Is Not What We Want to See,” (in Ukrainian) <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-world/3433534-kitaj-pro-vijnu-v-ukraini-ce-ne-te-so-nam-hosetsa-baciti.html>.

III. CONCLUSIONS

In sum, China, while maintaining its formal neutrality, actually provides assistance to Russia that enhances its resilience in the face of Western sanctions; consolidates pro-Russian narratives in the international environment; and reduces the efforts of the U.S. and the EU to mitigate Russia's international influence.

The likelihood of Chinese support for Ukraine remains very low, and Chinese statements that China is playing a "constructive role in resolving the Ukrainian crisis" and will not "sit idly by if it escalates" are misleading.

China's interest is a significant weakening and strategic defeat of the West, because a military victory of the Russian Federation against Ukraine would ensure a dramatic decrease in the image and position of the United States in Europe and the world, which would contribute to China becoming a superpower and undermining the network of U.S. alliances and ousting it from the Asia-Pacific region. In this aspect China is not interested in military victory of Ukraine¹⁶. Its actions, including development of partnership with the Russian Federation, weakening of the West, create systemic challenges for our state, which aims at integration into the EU and NATO.

In view of this, Ukraine's relations with China should be adjusted taking into account China's global goals regarding the achievement of world leadership and attempts to subvert the positions of the West, which constitute long-term challenges for Ukraine.

¹⁶ During a series of closed discussions with Chinese experts, it was concluded that the military defeat of Russia is the most unfavorable scenario for China.

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