

Research Reports

Research Group on 'Russia in an Era of Great Power Competition'

FY 2022-#3 3/30/2023

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One Year After the Invasion: China Induces Russia to Peace Talks

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China's Dilemma

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, put China in a difficult position. While China needs to maintain friendly relations with Russia, national sovereignty and territorial integrity have been principles that China has insisted on in the past. Naturally, this applies to the sovereignty and territory of Ukraine as well.

In a telephone conversation with Putin on February 25, the day after the invasion began, Xi Jinping said that he supported Russia resolving the issue with Ukraine through negotiations, and that China's basic position of respecting national sovereignty and territorial integrity and abiding by the UN Charter was consistent.¹ China faced the dilemma of whether to favor its relationship with Russia or the principle of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.

So which side did China end up choosing? In terms of actual behavior, China did not take the side of condemning Russia. One possibility would have been to insist on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, give up on a "rogue" Russia, and move closer to the United States. China did provide

humanitarian aid to Ukraine through the Red Cross but, even so, China did not come down on the side of condemning Russia.

On February 26, China abstained from voting on a resolution condemning Russia at the UN Security Council. After that, China continued to refer to Russia's invasion of Ukraine not as an "invasion" but as a "special military operation," following Russia's lead. The Xi Jinping administration eventually endorsed the use of force by Russia.

According to Akio Takahara, China decided that its highest priority was to win the strategic competition with the United States, and that partnership with Russia was essential for this purpose. China thereby exposed to the light of day a contradiction between its words and actions, advocating respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity but not actually applying this stance to Ukraine.² Even at that price, China did not and could not change its relationship with Russia.

Inducing Peace Negotiations

China's de facto support would then continue throughout 2022. Of course, China was not unanimously supportive of a runaway Putin about whom it also had "doubts and concerns". When Xi and Putin met on September 15, 2022 during Xi's visit to Samarkand to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit, Putin said that he appreciated China's "balanced stance" on the Ukraine crisis, remarking "I understand the doubts and concerns of the Chinese side".³ This statement was reported in many countries, and it thus became known that the Chinese side had conveyed "doubts and concerns" about Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In China, however, Xi Jinping's "doubts and concerns" expressed to Putin were not officially mentioned. The next day's broadcast of *Xinwen Lianbo* reported the news of the meeting between the two leaders for a mere two and a half minutes, and the content of the report was bland. This was an unusually short treatment for a meeting between the leaders of Russia and China, and even the news of a meeting between Xi Jinping and Belarusian President Lukashenko on the same day was longer (just under three minutes).⁴ Within China, there is a history of excluding from the public space any discourse that advocates moving away from Russia and closer to the West, and it is not possible to officially address "doubts and concerns" about Russia.

China's de facto support for Russia was subsequently reaffirmed at a December 30 online summit, with Xi noting that the two countries "strongly support each other on issues involving each other's core interests." At the same time, Xi appears to have steered Putin toward peace negotiations. According to an announcement by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Chinese side "praised" the Russian side for stating during their exchange of views on the Ukraine crisis that it "did not reject" the resolution of the conflict through diplomatic negotiations (从未拒绝以外交谈判方式解决冲突).⁵ Although this part is not mentioned in the Russian Presidential Office's announcement⁶, the argument that Russia, unlike Ukraine, has never refused to negotiate diplomatically is repeated in the Russian claims.

China found a pragmatic course of supporting Russia and guiding it toward peace negotiations in the face of a dilemma between its relations with Russia and the principle of respect for sovereignty and territory. Wang Yi, who met with Putin on February 22, 2023, also kept to this line. According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wang "praised" the Russian side for reiterating its "willingness" to resolve the issue through dialogue and negotiations (愿通过对话谈判解决问题)⁷. At the December summit, Russia had only "not refused" to resolve the issue through diplomatic negotiations, but here it was "willing" to do so. Again, however, this part is not mentioned in the Russian Presidential Office's announcement, so it is unclear to what extent the Russian side stated that it was really "willing".⁸ Nevertheless, subsequent developments suggest that Wang has gained Putin's understanding.

On February 24, two days after the meeting between Wang and Putin, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a 12-point document titled "China's Position on a Political Solution to the Ukraine Crisis"⁹. In the first point, China upheld the existing principle of respect for national sovereignty, while in the third point it expressed its intention to pursue a ceasefire and in the fourth point its intention to pursue peace negotiations. On the other hand, in the tenth point, it called for the suspension of unilateral sanctions, criticizing the West for imposing sanctions without the approval of the UN Security Council. China's approach of not reprimanding Russia but urging it to negotiate for peace while enabling Russia to save face was expressed in the form of this document. Therefore, despite often being referred to as a peace plan, this document should more accurately be thought of as a statement of China's position. The Russian side was quick to concur with this statement of China's position. The Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson has lauded China's position and repeatedly criticized the West and the Zelensky administration.¹⁰

Conclusion

After the Russian invasion began, China faced the dilemma of reconciling "Sino-Russian friendship" with respect for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. A year later, China has begun putting on a performance of pushing Russia toward peace negotiations, while at the same time continuing its support to Russia. However, there is no guarantee that this will work. In this regard, Aleksandr Gabuev of the Moscow Center of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace notes that senior Chinese officials are well aware that peace talks are unlikely to be finalized.¹¹

The possibility of peace talks coming to an agreement is not entirely excluded, but it is certainly unlikely. Above all, the biggest risk is the unreadability of Putin's moves. There is no guarantee that Putin will follow China's arrangement. He may nullify any preparations China has taken the trouble of making. Still, China's willingness to act as a peace broker, even if the negotiations do not go well, can create the impression to the rest of the world that it is the right country to advocate for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity and to call for peace. This is a great asset that differs from mere support for Russia. It could also be a provident move for China in the improbable event that Putin's government falls.

(This is an English translation of a Japanese paper originally published on February 28, 2023)

¹ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Xi Jinping speaks with President Putin by telephone," February 25, 2022. <

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/gjldrhd_674881/202202/t20220225_10645684.shtml> (All URLs of references cited in this report were last viewed February 27, 2023)

² Akio Takahara, "JIIA Strategic Comments (2022-03): China at a Crossroads: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Chinese Diplomacy," The Japan Institute of International Affairs website, March 11, 2022. <

https://www.jiia.or.jp/strategic_comment/2022-03.html>

³ ИТАР-ТАСС, "Путин: РФ понимает озабоченности и высоко ценит сбалансированную позицию КНР по Украине," 15.09.2022. < <https://tass.ru/politika/15761641>>

⁴ CCTV China Central Television, "Xi Jinping meets with Russian President," YouTube, September 17, 2022. < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJV0xcFO65I>>

⁵ China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Xi Jinping holds video meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin," December 30, 2022.

<https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/gjldrhd_674881/202212/t20221230_10999032.shtml>

⁶ Президент России, "Российско-китайские переговоры," 30.12.2022.

<<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70303>>

⁷ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Wang Yi," February 22, 2023.

<https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/gjldrhd_674881/202302/t20230222_11029753.shtml>

⁸ Президент России, "Встреча с членом политбюро ЦК Компартии Китая Ван И," 22.02.2023.

<<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70573>>

⁹ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "China's position on a political solution to the crisis in Ukraine," February 24, 2023. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202302/t20230224_11030707.shtml>

¹⁰ МИД России, "Комментарий официального представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой в связи с публикацией МИД КНР "Позиции Китая по политическому урегулированию украинского кризиса", " 24.02.2023. <https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1855483/?lang=ru>

¹¹ Александр Габуев, "Не прошло и года. Зачем Китаю мирный план по Украине," Carnegie

Endowment for International Peace, 24.02 .2023. <<https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89133>>