

ASSESSING CHINA'S ROLE AS A MEDIATOR IN UKRAINE CRISIS

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At the onset of the Ukraine crisis, China followed a cautious approach and highlighted its 'principled neutrality'. China noted that it was not a party to the war and beyond calls for dialogue and restraint, it did not expend much diplomatic effort. However, in the last few months, China has appeared interested in playing a major role as a mediator in the Ukraine crisis. For instance, on the date of the first-year anniversary of the conflict, China published a document titled 'China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis' which highlighted 12 points to achieve ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine.¹

Further, during his visit to Moscow on 21 March 2023, President Xi Jinping in a meeting with President Vladimir Putin, emphasised his interest to promote a political solution for the Ukraine crisis. Earlier in April, during a meeting with the visiting French President Emmanuel Macron, Xi proposed that China and France should push for a political solution of the crisis.² More importantly, for the first time since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, Xi Jinping spoke to the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy informing him that China's "core stance is to facilitate talks for peace".³ These actions have revived discussions among the international strategic community about China's perception of the Ukraine crisis and its possible role as a mediator.

In February 2022, when Russia's military campaign against Ukraine began, Beijing perceived the war primarily through the lens of major power rivalry and China's national interest. For instance, then Foreign Minister Wang Yi's comments during the start of the conflict indicated that Beijing saw the armed conflict as manifestation of a long-standing political rivalry between West and Russia. In his talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Wang Yi remarked that China recognised the complex historical context and maintained that Cold War mentality should be completely abandoned.⁴

These remarks referring to extended Cold War rivalry between the West and Russia were reiterated multiple times in public statements by Chinese officials and leaders to emphasise that as the Ukraine conflict is essentially a contest between the West and Russia, it is not comparable to the Taiwan situation, which China considers as an internal matter. Also, it was emphasised that China will not be dragged into major power contestation.⁵ Besides focusing on the rivalry dimension, the Chinese leadership saw the crisis both as a challenge and opportunity for China's strategic interests.⁶

One of the major challenges China envisaged was portrayal of its image as a collaborator because the military operation followed a few weeks after China's declaration of 'no-limit' partnership with Russia. Further, Beijing assessed that the war will strengthen and revive the Trans-Atlantic alliance, deepen the West's resolve to contain China and strain her relations with the US and the EU in the long-run. However, it was also believed that China might gain as the war could become a distraction for the US and its European allies, drawing them away from the Indo-Pacific. More importantly, a prolonged conflict would probably weaken both Europe and Russia, relaxing China's strategic environment in both Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific region.

In terms of policy responses, therefore, China did not stand by either Russia or the West. China

sought to distance itself from Russia's actions by calling for dialogue and respect of territorial integrity. Beijing remained very cautious about not appearing to provide concrete material support to Russia in its war efforts against Ukraine. Beijing also assured Ukraine that China will never attack Ukraine or challenge its territorial integrity. Alternatively, China intensified its criticism of NATO and popularised anti-US and NATO propaganda. The Chinese leadership also ignored Western pressure to press Russia to stop the Ukraine war and continued strengthening its strategic and economic partnership with Russia.

A year into the war, China's perception of the Ukraine crisis has not changed, though its concerns are visible. The state-media *Global Times*, considered CCP's mouthpiece, opined that the war has entered a phase of stalemate.⁷ Since both Russia and Ukraine are determined to maximise territorial gains before being forced to negotiate, the conflict is likely to prolong. The real danger of the war of attrition that China perceives is that Russia's heightened anxiety could lead to use of tactical nuclear weapons. Highlighting this concern, China's permanent representative to the UN Zhang Jun emphasised that "nuclear weapons cannot be used and a nuclear war cannot be fought".¹⁰ Considering that Russia followed through with the threat to send its army into Ukraine, Moscow similarly could use nuclear weapons as Putin has threatened to use all weapons systems available if Russia's "territorial integrity" is threatened.⁸ According to Western analysts, such a possibility could pose a significant moral dilemma to China, jeopardising China's balancing act between Russia, Ukraine, US and EU.⁹

China's attempts to engage as a mediator for finding a political solution to the conflict is possibly driven by three factors. First is to prevent further escalation of the Ukraine conflict into a nuclear war. To that end, in November 2022, Beijing signalled its opposition towards use of nuclear weapons when Xi Jinping informed German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz that nuclear weapons cannot be used in the war. This same sentiment was reiterated in the 12 Points Peace Proposal released during the first-year anniversary of Ukraine war in 2023.

In this context, it is noteworthy that although Beijing at this point is unsure whether Russia will follow through with its threat of using tactical nuclear weapons, it is determined not to allow Russia frame China as complicit in the decision. Therefore, Xi Jinping travelled to Moscow in March 2023 to issue a joint pledge against deployment of nuclear weapons outside the national territories.¹⁰

The second factor influencing Beijing's decision could be to ease the geopolitical pressure China has been facing from the US and EU. This can work in different ways. First, China can try to negotiate with the EU and US to recalibrate their policies towards China, in exchange for Beijing pushing Russia to the negotiating table. Second, it can hope to weaken their opposition by deepening the divisions within EU and between US and EU about China by projecting itself as a valuable partner in the Ukraine crisis.

There have been few indications in this regard. For instance, days before French President Macron and EU Chief Ursula von der Leyen's visit, China's Envoy to EU called for revival of stalled discussion on Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) trade pact.¹¹ The EU Chief also acknowledged that decoupling from China was not possible, even as she stressed 'de-risking' trade ties.¹²

Meanwhile, the divisions within EU and between EU and the US over China are also apparent. Reportedly, Brussels is struggling to forge a consensus approach on China as some countries are inclined to engage with Beijing over trade and Ukraine crisis.¹³ Concurrently, as Washington is increasing pressure on its allies to align closely with the US against China, France along with some of EU top officials have openly called for Europe not to follow US policy on China.¹⁴

Finally, Beijing also sees this as an opportunity to revamp its image as a stable force in the international realm. China's feat in brokering a diplomatic thaw between Saudi Arabia and Iran promoted China's image as a global diplomatic and economic leader. Accordingly, if China is able to facilitate talks between Russia and Ukraine, it will not only help Beijing strengthen its diplomatic clout in Eastern Europe, but could also send a message to the countries in the Indo-Pacific about China being a responsible power and about its peaceful intent.

China's ability to mediate in the Ukraine crisis is contingent on a number of factors, including on intention of both parties to come to the negotiating table. Moscow has vowed to press on with its offensive. Concurrently, while Kiev has welcomed China's role as a mediator, it intends to strive for more territorial gains. Distrust of Chinese intentions primarily in EU and the US could also become a major determining factor. The European Commission and the US have dismissed China's peace proposal as a "political initiative" aimed to distract international attention away from China's support of Russia.¹⁵ At present, the US and the European countries are closely following whether China will provide military aid to Russia. China in the past has kept away from the Ukraine crisis citing its complex historical context. As the situation in Ukraine is constantly evolving, it remains to be seen what role China will play in the resolution of the conflict.

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