

## **CHINA'S MOTIVATIONS OF THE RHETORICAL AMBIGUITY OVER RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE**

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### **SUMMARY**

The paper discusses the basic rhetorical strategy and arguments adopted by the diplomats and policymakers of the People's Republic of China after Russia invaded Ukraine. It argues that the rhetorical ambiguity serves as a vehicle for conveying messages to Russia, the United States, the European Union, and domestic public opinion. While the strong narrative, accusing the United States of being hostile and a manipulator, is mainly for domestic consumption, statements from high ranking policymakers are part of China's foreign policy. The strident language used at home, limiting any possible discussion over China's policy towards Russia, as well as Xi Jinping's close personal relations with Putin, strengthen the position of Xi Jinping before the 20th Congress later this year. The softer stance abroad includes possible solutions and expresses the political will to talk with Western partners.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. China's position vis a vis the Russian invasion in Ukraine is defined by a 4<sup>th</sup> February China Russia "Joint Statement on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development" and particularly the passage: *The Chinese side is sympathetic to and supports the proposals put forward by the Russian Federation to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe.*
2. While Russia's invasion in Ukraine got stuck China through ambiguous statements, has tried to manoeuvre between its interests in the West and relations with Russia.
3. Lower rank diplomatic staff, namely the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokespersons have used harsh language, while high ranking policymakers, afraid of the limited options in China's foreign policy, present a more balanced approach.
4. From Beijing's perspective, the most important element of China's foreign policy is its relations with the United States. China's statements, delivered by high ranking policymakers vis a vis Russia, should be regarded as proxy messages addressed to Washington.
5. The Chinese UN Ambassador's statements are as neutral as possible because China hopes not to antagonize countries from the Global South.
6. On the one hand, China can contribute from American involvement in Europe and strengthen its strategic position in the Indo-Pacific region. On the other, China needs to calculate that the humanitarian crisis in Europe, along with its long term impact on the Belt and Road Initiative in Eurasian space and possible damage to Western China's economic development will negatively influence its domestic socio-economic plans.
7. A more assertive European Union, will, to a certain extent, influence Beijing's plans to transform its economy into a dual-circulation model as well as the challenges its "people-centric" and "common prosperity" policies face.
8. Russia's international isolation along with China's ineffective zero-tolerance COVID-19 policy might push the Chinese government to redefine China's understanding of international relations from "peace and development" towards a more isolationist approach. This could lead to limiting possible internal party debates over relations with Russia as well as underpinning the paramount leader's position before the next party congress.

## INTRODUCTION

Although the focus of the international community is quite rightly focused on Russia, Ukraine, NATO, the United States, and the EU concerning the current war in Ukraine, there are other potential consequences. China is watching with a certain trepidation. It sees how the Americans mobilize their friends in times of crisis, and how American diplomacy uses the United Nations to leak classified information. Although the Chinese government feels duty-bound to support Russia and its imperialistic ambitions, China runs the risk of being labelled an imperial power, especially in the developing world and by this limits their options in China's foreign policy. In addition, current Russian policy may trigger a possible move from Japan regarding territorial claims and push China toward closer relations with the G7 and the EU. Going beyond the current global situation, we need to look closer at the declarations issued by the Chinese diplomacy and the leadership in the time of Russia's war against Ukraine. Apart from this, we need to acknowledge that the current diplomatic statement reflects a lack of consensus within the Communist Party of China's "lying on one side" full support for Russian policy as well as a lack of political will to change the current paradigm of "peace and development" (*heping yu fazhan*) as a major theme of the times (*shidai zhuti*) in the year of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.

## THE SPOKESPERSON LEVEL: STATING WHO IS GUILTY

Just after Russia invaded Ukraine, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Hua Chunying, hosted a scheduled press conference on February 24, 2022. She assured those in attendance that China was closely monitoring the latest developments and called on all parties to exercise restraint and prevent the situation from spiralling out of control. China noted that Russia had announced a special military operation in eastern Ukraine, with the Russian Ministry of Defense stating that its armed forces will not carry out missile, air or artillery attacks on cities. She added that on the Ukraine issue, China reiterated its principled position since the conflict had a complex historical background. The spokesperson went on to say that the conflict was the result of a combination of various factors. Hua Chunying re-emphasized China's consistent standpoint over the security of all countries, which should be common, cooperative, and sustainable, while the legitimate

security concerns of all parties should be respected and resolved. At the time, China still saw room for peace and supported a continuation of engaging in dialogue, consultation, and negotiation to ease the situation as soon as possible and prevent any further escalation. Hua Chunying also emphasized that the Chinese people have a profound understanding, a sense of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, which should not be questioned by other nations. The spokesperson said that “China has suffered from the Eight-Nation Alliance Forces and foreign colonial aggression and has an unforgettable tragic memory of losing power and humiliation of the country.” She went on to say that China still faces what it perceives as the real threat posed by the United States, and several of its so-called allies, which wantonly interfere in China's internal affairs on issues related to Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and undermined China's sovereignty and security. The foreign affairs spokesperson then stated that China, as the only permanent member of the Security Council that has not achieved complete reunification of the motherland, has always resolutely upheld the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and the basic norms governing international relations, resolutely safeguarded national sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, and international fairness and justice. Responding to the United States' suggestion that Russia is backed by China in its invasion of Ukraine, the spokesperson concluded that Russia is a permanent member of the Security Council and an independent power, who formulates and implements its diplomatic strategy entirely based on its judgment and national interests. Sino-Russian relations are based on non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-targeting of any third party. China is not interested in and has no intention of following, the Cold War mentality of either friend or foe (Hua Chunying 2022). By saying this, the Chinese ministry has attempted to distance China from the Russian war, although without labelling Russian actions as a war or invasion.

The 28<sup>th</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs conference marked a shift in China's narrative. Once asked about China's neutral position Wang Weibing answered: “Our position on the Ukraine issue is consistent. We always decide on our position and policy based on the merits of the matter itself. We always stand on the side of peace and justice” (Wang Weibin 2022). Surprised by Weibing's answer, American diplomats informed the Chinese side that Russia was preparing to attack Ukraine and urged China to persuade Russia not

to do so. However, the spokesperson stated that “China’s practice stands in stark contrast to that of a certain country, who has created and shifted crisis to others and reaped gains from it. I believe people will make a fair judgment as to which approach is more conducive to the security, stability, and lasting peace in Europe” (Wang Weibin 2022). By saying so, Wang Weibin was singling out the United States (indirectly) but his statement also expressed China’s worries of being labelled an imperialistic power.

The March 4<sup>th</sup> press conference was marked by the spokesperson accusing the United States of spreading disinformation and smearing China concerning the Ukraine issue. Interestingly, Wang Weibin only defended China’s position in the conflict, while remaining silent on Washington-Moscow relations (Wang Weibin 2022a). But, as stated by Zhao Lijian (2022), while rejecting the Western accusation of being passive in the conflict, China did accuse the United States of being responsible for the current crisis. “China has been independently making decisions in the spirit of objectivity and fairness and based on the merits of the matter itself” (Zhao Lijian 2022). However, the White House observed that China had not complained about Western sanctions on Russia. Zhao Lijian countered this claim by warning the United States that once the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies will be threatened, China will take all necessary measures to resolutely safeguard its economy. But the spokesperson did not comment on Xi Jinping’s use of the word “war” while discussing the situation in Ukraine with Macron and Scholtz during a video summit (Zhao Lijian 2022a).

### THE CHINESE AMBASSADOR IN KIEV

As recently as January 19, 2022, the Chinese Embassy in Ukraine had celebrated the 30th anniversary of the establishment of China-Ukraine diplomatic ties. The Chinese Ambassador, Fan Xianrong, stressed that the relations between the two countries had continuously developed, noting the deepening, and expanding cooperation between the two countries. The strategic Sino-Ukrainian partnership was illustrated by the fact that China was Ukraine's largest trading partner, while Ukraine was the biggest supplier of corn, sunflower oil, and meal to the Chinese market (Xinhua 2022).

Just over a month later, on February 24, 2022, as an outcome of the Russian attack on Ukraine, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) announced its decision to launch

a joint defense plan and increase its forces in Eastern Europe. This was followed up by the West's preparation to impose sanctions on Russia by Western countries (Al Jazeera 2022). But geopolitics was not the biggest issue for the Chinese ambassador in Kyiv. The biggest challenge was how to evacuate Chinese citizens from Ukraine. The ambassador, who was still residing in Kyiv, on February 25, 2022, stated on the website of the Chinese embassy in Ukraine, warning Chinese citizens and Chinese-funded enterprises based in Ukraine that they were in danger due to the sharp deterioration in security in Ukraine.

Another statement was issued on February 26, 2022, in which the Chinese Embassy in Ukraine emphasized to their compatriots the importance in the current security situation of retaining friendly relations with the Ukrainian people, avoiding disputes over ongoing issues, and striving to solve problems in a friendly manner. Chinese citizens, the statement said, should also be mindful about minimizing security risks by staying away from military installations, military personnel if possible, and not taking pictures of any parties involved in an exchange of fire, especially without the consent of the other party; and to not reveal their own identity, etc. In addition, Chinese citizens were told to be wary of any misinformation regarding chartered flights. However, several Chinese citizens were disappointed and frustrated by the Chinese government's response to the crisis.

In a video call on February 27, 2022, the Chinese ambassador to Ukraine, Fan Xianrong, dismissed any rumours surrounding his possible evacuation back to China, saying that he remained in Kyiv and faced a difficult situation together with his compatriots. The announcement on the embassy's website on February 28 stated that since fighting between the two sides was continuing, and the security situation in Ukraine continued to deteriorate, some Chinese citizens in Ukraine had encountered practical difficulties. However, some Chinese civic organizations and individuals had already begun to take action to assist compatriots in need. The embassy also said it highly appreciated the acts of kindness and believed that it reflected the fine tradition of the Chinese nation's solidarity. The announcement stated that the Embassy encouraged a continuation of these practices, especially when supplies in shops were seriously low. Interestingly, the Chinese ambassador in Ukraine called for the Chinese people to stay together and "rely on the great spirit of the Chinese people under the leadership of the Communist Party of

China" (Kyiv China Embassy 2022a). Wang Yi also stated that "Chinese citizens in Ukraine are all envoys of China-Ukraine friendship and friends of the Ukrainian people" (Wang Yi 2022d). This statement was in stark contrast to a Chinese citizen who in a video message said that he pretended to be Japanese to avoid being affiliated with the Russian aggressor to limit any possible tensions between Chinese and Ukrainian people.

What should be taken as the surprise Fan Xianrong said on March 16 at a meeting with Lviv Oblast Governor Maksym Kozytsky that China would never attack Ukraine and would provide economic aid to the country (The Kyiv Independent 2022). The declaration from the Chinese Kyiv Embassy shows a lack of coordination with the central government in Beijing and should be perceived as an insurance policy so that Chinese citizens are not accused of supporting the Russian invaders.

### CHINA IN THE UNITED NATIONS

On February 25, the Security Council held a meeting to vote on a draft resolution regarding the current situation in Ukraine. Ambassador Zhang Jun, Permanent Representative of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations abstained in the vote and stressed that China believed that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states should be respected and that the purposes and principles of the UN Charter should be jointly upheld. China, the ambassador stated being deeply concerned about the latest developments of the situation in Ukraine, encouraged all efforts in seeking a diplomatic solution, and supported the Russian Federation and Ukraine in resolving the issue through negotiations.

The ambassador called on all of the parties involved to exercise maximum restraint, ease tensions, and avoid civilian casualties. Exerting pressure and imposing sanctions may lead to more complicated and chaotic situations and put more obstacle in the way of bridging differences. The ambassador stressed that the issue of Ukraine is a result of the interplay of various factors over a long time. However, Ukraine should become a bridge between East and West, and not an outpost for confrontation between major powers (Zhang Jun 2022a).

Two days later, on February 27, 2022, Ambassador Zhang Jun explained his vote at the UN Security Council on the Resolution on Ukraine by stating that China supported and encouraged all diplomatic efforts, which would lead to a peaceful settlement of the Ukraine crisis. The ambassador stated that China supported both the European and Russian sides in conducting dialogue on an equal footing regarding European security issues, which could eventually form a balanced, effective and sustainable European security mechanism (Zhang Jun 2022b).

On February 28, 2022, Zhang Jun stated that the situation in Ukraine was rapidly changing and called on all parties concerned to exercise necessary restraint, prevent further worsening of the situation while stepping up diplomatic efforts that were aimed at a political solution. He stated that the Cold War had long ended, and its mentality based on bloc confrontation should be abandoned. One country's security should not come at the expense of other countries' security, and regional security should not rely on reinforcing or even expanding military blocs.

China supports the EU, NATO, and Russia in resuming dialogue, bearing in mind the concept of indivisible security, properly addressing the legitimate security concerns of all parties, including Russia, and striving to put in place a balanced, effective, and sustainable, lasting peace and stability for the European continent (Zhang Jun 2022c). Moreover, the ambassador called upon all parties concerned to exercise restraint, de-escalate the situation, and avoid civilian casualties. He stressed that the safety of all civilians, including foreign nationals, should have their humanitarian needs effectively guaranteed and that it was of the utmost importance to prevent a large-scale humanitarian crisis (Zhang Jun 2022d).

On March 2, 2022, Ambassador Zhang Jun emphasized that the current top priority was to prevent the situation from escalating or even getting out of control. He said that China welcomed the fact that Russia and Ukraine had already held their first round of negotiations despite their differences and called on the international community to stick to the overall direction of political settlement and foster conditions for direct dialogues and negotiations between the parties concerned (Zhang Jun 2022e).



In his remarks made on March 8, 2022, the ambassador reiterated that China remained deeply concerned and saddened about the rapidly changing situation in Ukraine where there were increasing numbers of civilian casualties. In the eyes of Chinese diplomats, the humanitarian crisis was seen as something unpredictable and detrimental to the European Union's economic development in the future. That is, the ambassador said, why China appealed for maximum restraint and had stepped-up diplomatic efforts to put an early end to the fight, ensuring the protection of civilian lives and preventing the emergence of a large-scale humanitarian crisis. China, he said, also noted that Russia and Ukraine had reached an agreement through negotiations on the establishment of humanitarian corridors (Zhang Jun 2022f). During the United Nations Security Council meeting called by Russia concerning alleged American bioweapons laboratories, Ambassador Zhang, for the first time openly called on Washington to be transparent and disclose information about American laboratories around the world. Interestingly, he repeated what the Russian representative has said about American biochemical activities the previous day.(Zhang Jun 2022g).

### THE LEADERS AND A BALANCED APPROACH

Meanwhile, the reaction from China's higher diplomatic echelons struck a different tone. Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, spoke on the phone with Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, after Russia had invaded Ukraine. He emphasized that China always respected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries and saw that the Ukrainian issue had its complex and special historical latitude and longitude. He went on to say that although China understood Russia's legitimate concerns about security issues, the country advocated for a complete abandonment of Cold War mentality and should be replaced by a European security mechanism through dialogue and negotiation (VoA Chinese 2022). China's foreign ministry added that Beijing would not provide any weapons to the parties involved in the Ukraine crisis as the United States had (Al Jazeera 2022a).

During a call, Presidents Xi Jinping and Putin exchanged views about the Russian war against Ukraine. In diplomatic language, the meaning of "exchange views" means less than nothing. "China supports Russia and Ukraine to resolve issues through

negotiations," Xi said (February 25, 2022). In other words, China secures its position of being the ultimate arbiter and bides its time to ensure that the country can exploit the situation to the fullest.

China has washed its hands of any negative consequences stemming from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the lead up to the EU-China Summit (April 1), an interesting shift was revealed by Xi Jinping during a call with French President Macron and the German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz, "the Chinese side is deeply saddened by the outbreak of war once again on the European continent". On the one hand, it marked a change in China's perception but did not mention who was responsible, either the United States as stated by China's press officers or Russia. On the other hand, Xi Jinping has tried to soften the position of European leaders before this important summit (Xi Jinping 2022).

During a phone call between President Biden and Chairman Xi, the American side threatened "serious consequences" in the event of Chinese aid to Russia, which is the belligerent force in Ukraine. But what did Chairman Xi say? Two important issues should be pointed out here: the first concerns interference in China's internal affairs. First, Xi noted "that some people on the US side have not followed through on the important mutual understanding reached by the two leaders and have not acted on President Biden's positive statements." And the second even more important issue: "The dominant trend of peace and development is facing serious challenges. The world is neither peaceful nor stable" (Xi Jinping 2022a). In this context, the Chinese leader has opened a discussion about a potential revision of the general paradigm coined by Deng Xiaoping as "peace and development". Such a dialog would be necessary to open an internal discussion on the balance of changes in the external policy framework. The two issues will then be on the agenda: Xi Jinping's paramount leadership position vs. the economic and technological development of China in the future.

In a conversation with the German minister of foreign affairs, Annalena Baerbock, Chinese officials emphasized that China did not support the use of sanctions to solve the problem and was even more opposed to unilateral sanctions that had no basis in international law. It was also reiterated that sanctions would not only fail as a solution to problems but would generate even more issues, which would lead to a "lose-lose"

situation in the economy and interfere with the process of any political settlement of the conflict. It was also stated that China was paying close attention to the changes in the Ukraine situation and supported all efforts to ease the crisis and resolve it. Under the circumstances, the Chinese side also said that with five consecutive stages of NATO's eastward expansion, Russia's legitimate security demands should be taken seriously and properly addressed. Wang Yi said that all involved parties should maintain calm and avoid further escalation of the situation. Moreover, according to the Chinese readout both officials also appealed to completely abandon the Cold War mentality, and finally form a balanced, effective, and sustainable European security mechanism through dialogue and negotiation (Wang Yi 2022). In a conversation with Luigi Di Maio, Wang Yi supported the peace talks, while omitting what Russia saw as its legitimate right to express its security concerns (Wang Yi 2022h).

Of course, of paramount importance for China is its relations with the United States. Once Putin initiated his war in Ukraine, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, issued a slew of statements about Sino-American relations over one week. The reason for this activity was the 50th Anniversary of Richard Nixon's visit to China and the Shanghai Communique. As we all know, both countries agreed on the one-China policy, however, in the Shanghai Communique, the American side only acknowledged that "all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China". (Shanghai Communique 1972). This consensus after 50 years was used to signal for Washington to start a conversation about the future of China-US relations. As Wang Yi (2022b) declared in February 2022 "The mainstream of Sino-US relations should be cooperation". Moreover, in another statement Wang Yi recalled a meeting between Biden and Xi (November 2021) when both sides agreed to frame relations on the three principles of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation. From the American perspective as admitted by Wang Yi, President Biden responded positively and stated that he does not seek to fight a "new Cold War", does not seek to change China's system, does not seek to oppose China by strengthening alliances, does not support "Taiwan independence", and has no intention of initiating conflict with China (Wang Yi 2022c). Wang Yi put forward four propositions on implementing the consensus reached by the two heads of state and bringing China-U.S. relations back on track as soon as

possible: First, adhere to the one-China principle and consolidate the political foundation of China-U.S. relations; second, adhere to mutual respect and move China-U.S. relations into the right direction. The third was to adhere to win-win cooperation and promote the development and prosperity of China and the United States; the fourth principle was to adhere to the responsibility of a major country and provide more public goods for the world (Wang Yi 2022c).

The Chinese foreign minister, while speaking at a press conference on the sidelines of the annual meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC), discussed China's overall foreign policy. While describing China-Russia relations Wang Yi informed the public that the joint communique signed after Putin's visit to Beijing opposed "the cold war mentality, oppose provoking ideological confrontation, promoting the democratization of international relations, and advocate safeguarding the purposes and principles of the UN Charter" (Wang Yi 2022e). More than this the Chinese minister assured the Chinese public that bilateral relations with Russia were based on three principles: non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-targeting of third parties, and were not subject to interference and provocation by third parties (Wang Yi 2022e). While referring to the current conflict, Wang Yi said that "China believes that to resolve the current crisis, we must adhere to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, respect and safeguard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries; we must adhere to the principle of indivisibility of security and accommodate the legitimate security concerns of the parties; we must insist on peaceful solutions through dialogue and negotiation. We must focus on the long-term stability of the region and build a balanced, effective, and sustainable European security mechanism" (Wang Yi 2022f). This balanced approach allows Beijing to exercise its paramount position in relations with Russia while keeping the door open for negotiations with the West. On the other hand, Wang Yi did not discuss the "central paradigm of the times" as "peace and development" but rather negatively stated that "The great power competition is not the theme of the times, and the zero-sum game is not the right choice" (Wang Yi 2022f).

## CONCLUSIONS

From Beijing's point of view, relations with Russia are intended to strengthen its competitive advantage in influencing Washington. However, as the war continues and the situation worsens, Beijing is also sending signals to Washington. Wang Yi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, in several speeches, when discussing the anniversary of Nixon's visit, spoke about cooperation and coordination in "the most important relations in the world." (Wang Yi 2022g). In addition, the Chinese minister indicated that President Biden had agreed to conduct pragmatic relations with Beijing (Ibid.). Nixon's visit was praised in the editorial of the People's Daily, stressing that only a few in the US wanted to marginalize China. A more important signal, however, is the text that was published on March 1, which covered the history of Sino-American relations since Nixon's visit. The two powers were compared to two giant ships navigating global waters and it was emphasized that it was important that the courses of the two should not lead to collisions. Such metaphors may seem ludicrous, but the language of Chinese diplomacy has a penchant for ambiguous terms, often giving room for interpretation. This does not mean that Beijing will suddenly cancel economic ties with the Russian Federation or stop its propaganda attacks on the United States, but in this way, it is preparing a narrative to cover for undoubtedly difficult diplomatic negotiations.

Moreover, the Chinese elite realizes that the trade war is not over and that competition for financial and technological resources with the Biden administration will intensify. This is where the main axis of competition runs, and new US sanctions are on the horizon. After what Putin did, the United States has a united West, and the introduced "nuclear" sanctions against Russia would have "impressed" China. However, from the perspective of Chinese actions, the declarations of the US economic policy are more important. In his speech to the American Congress, the American president, in addition to his firm stance on Putin, assured the American people that he would carry out huge infrastructure projects, create jobs and improve working conditions. He defended the liberal economic model, demanding equal competition for all. Moreover, he also emphasized that the United States was carrying out a wide-ranging reindustrialization plan (Biden 2022). This signal to Beijing is clear and corresponds to the West's united anti-Putin front. This might

suggest that being in a trade war with the United States combined with its zero-tolerance for COVID-19 policy failure might lead the party to explain and justify Xi Jinping's position and reshape the Deng Xiaoping framework of international politics known as "peace and development". For now, Li Keqiang during the National People's Congress put an end to the speculation of China's future position in international politics: "It has been 40-plus years since China started opening up. Through opening-up, China has developed itself and brought benefits to its people and the world. We will not and must not close this door of opportunity."

This, however, together with China's ineffective zero-tolerance COVID-19 policy might lead the party to explain and justify the position of Xi Jinping by reshaping Deng Xiaoping's "peace and development" framework.

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