



RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR AND CHINA'S GLOBAL INTERESTS

Märt Läänemets, PhD

*Estonian Academy of Security Sciences
Internal Security Institute, researcher
Estonia*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will explore China's interest in becoming involved in the Ukrainian peace process, focusing on two main aspects. First, we will examine the Sino-Russian strategic partnership in the context of China's efforts and involvement. Second, we will analyse the potential benefits that China could gain from the war in Ukraine. The author argues in favour of the position that achieving peace in Ukraine is not China's primary concern. Instead, China's main objective is to safeguard its own strategic and geopolitical position by actively participating in this process. Russia's defeat in the war is not in China's interest. So, China is making efforts to promote its approach to the peace process in Ukraine, to keep the existing status quo and to maintain Russia's control over the occupied territories. A relatively weak Russia, albeit possessing significant military and nuclear capabilities, would be the best solution for China. This would enable the formation of a solid counterbalance to the U.S.-led West, with a further aim to gain global control and establish a new world order with its own set of rules. Ukraine would continue to fall within the spheres of influence of both Russia and China, while the Western powers would need to retreat and follow China's command.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the commencement of a full-scale war against it in February 2022, China's stance on this conflict has been a subject of acute concern among political actors and analysts. In 2023, during the second phase of the war when the Russian offensive faltered and the Ukrainian counterattack slowly progressed, Beijing exhibited some peacemaking efforts to address what it euphemistically terms the 'Ukrainian crisis'. However, Western and Ukrainian authorities have expressed skepticism regarding China's stance. This scepticism arises from the fact that, in its peace rhetoric, China has never demanded a withdrawal of Russian military forces from the annexed territories of Ukraine as a necessary precondition for any peace talks and agreement between the two sides.¹ Instead, China is urging both parties to seek a 'peaceful solution' to the crisis, as if both parties were equally responsible and Russia was not the aggressor. Furthermore, China is also demanding that the West immediately stop military aid to Ukraine. This peace rhetoric seems to align more with the Russian position rather than fostering the groundwork for an effective and constructive peace process aimed at restoring the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

China's behaviour is quite understandable when considered within the broader geopolitical context as it has long positioned itself as a partner, if not ally, of Russia and is moving towards a more pronounced Cold-War style confrontation with the U.S.-led West, often accusing the latter of this escalation. Hence, in this war, China has consistently refrained from directly criticizing the aggressor and has even refused to call Russia's aggression against its neighbouring country a war or invasion. Instead, it frequently employs euphemisms such as 'Ukrainian crisis'² or, following Russia's rhetoric, 'special military operation'³. Additionally, China

¹ We can point out three important actions of Chinese peace initiatives in 2023. Firstly, its 12-point proposal from February 24 (China's Position 2023); secondly, visit of Chinese special envoy Li Hui to Kyiv in May with the message of "political solution" (McCarthy 2023, Tiezzi 2023) that was preceded by the telephone call of Ukrainian President Zelenskyi and China's Chairman Xi Jinping; and, thirdly, China's participation in Ukraine peace talks in Jeddah with delegation lead again by Li Hui in August (Graham-Harrison 2023). Comprehensive overview of China's statements and actions from 21 February 2022 through 26 April 2023 can be found in USCC 2023.

² In Chinese: 烏克蘭危機 *wū kè lán wēi jī*. On China's pervasive use of the very term as well as the next one (see note 5) in English see, e.g., related papers in CCP English language mouthpiece Global Times (<https://www.globaltimes.cn/>). On Chinese reasoning of avoiding the word 'war' in this context see also Shepherd, Rauhala and Tan 2022.

³ In Chinese: 特別軍事行動 *tè bié jūn shì xíng dòng*

has opted not to join the sanctions against Russia imposed by Western countries and their democratic allies in Asia and other regions. On the contrary, throughout the war, China has notably increased its trade with Russia. (Sor 2023)

In the UN, China has consistently abstained from voting on GA resolutions that condemn Russian aggression and the initiation of an undeclared war against the sovereign state of Ukraine. Beijing has followed the same pattern in the UN Security Council, while the latter's other permanent member, Russia, has vetoed any attempts to block any resolutions demanding that Russia ceases its aggression.⁴

All these factors, coupled with China's regular official declarations affirming their mutual interest in sustaining 'all-sided co-operation' and fostering 'friendship beyond limits' with Russia⁵ within the framework of its 'great power diplomacy'⁶ (see: Yoshikazu 2019) underscore China's position. This position is further accentuated by its continuous denunciation of the US and NATO, which it blames for escalating the situation in Ukraine to the point where Russia felt compelled to react to protect its rightful interests and security in the region. It indicates that, at least politically, China is backing Russia in the latter's 'special military operation.' Ultimately, as it participates in the Ukrainian peace process in the role of a neutral mediator, China primarily pursues its interests, to strengthen its position on the international stand. China recognises that it cannot achieve this by decoupling itself from Russia and aligning with the West. Additionally, China is attempting to garner support from the Global South, seeing the Ukraine war as an opportunity to build a broader international alliance.

This paper will explore some aspects of China's approach to the peace process in Ukraine, with a primary focus on two key themes: (1) The war

⁴ China abstained voting UN Security Council resolution on 26 February 2022 that would have demanded that Moscow immediately stop its attack on Ukraine and withdraw all troops (UN News 2022); it also abstained in Security Council voting to call for emergency special session of the 193-member UN General Assembly on Russia's military operation in Ukraine on 27 February 2022 (UN News 2022). China also abstained UN GA resolution from 2 March 2022 demanding that Russia immediately end its military operations in Ukraine (UN News 2022,) as well as the UN Human Rights Council resolution that condemns Russia's invasion of Ukraine and establishes an independent international commission of inquiry to investigate allegations of war crimes and human rights abuses (Resolution 2022).

⁵ In Chinese: 中俄友誼無上限 *zhōng é yǒu yì wú shàng xiàn*. See the text of statement: Statement 2022.

⁶ In Chinese: 大國外交 *dà guó wài jiāo*. On this very concept read more from Li and Yuan 2021.

in Ukraine and the Sino-Russian strategic partnership and (2) China's potential benefits derived from the war in Ukraine.

1. WAR IN UKRAINE AND SINO-RUSSIAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Over the one-and-a-half years since the Russian war commenced in Ukraine, the issue of the Sino-Russian partnership and the trajectory of cooperation between these two nations has been a frequent and extensively debated topic. The expression most frequently quoted to signify the special relations between China and Russia in this context is the declaration of friendship 'beyond limits' or 'without limits' as noted in the *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*. This statement was signed on 4 February 2022, just a couple of weeks before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, during a meeting in Beijing between the leaders of both nations. The relevant passage from this twelve-page document (Statement 2022) reads as follows:

The sides call for the establishment of a new kind of relationship between world powers based on mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and mutually beneficial cooperation. They reaffirm that the new interstate relations between Russia and China are superior to the political and military alliances of the Cold War era. The friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no "forbidden" areas of cooperation, strengthening of bilateral strategic cooperation is neither aimed against third countries nor affected by the changing international environment and circumstantial changes in third countries.

In light of ensuing events, the statement 'there are no "forbidden" areas of cooperation' sounds alarming as it implies the potential for military collaboration and arms supply by China to Russia, the worst nightmare of the Western powers supporting Ukraine in the ongoing war. Up to this point, despite offering ongoing political support, economic aid and some limited military cooperation, such as joint military exercises, e.g., naval exercises in the East China Sea in December 2022 (see Mahadzir 2022) and the joint naval patrol involving 11 warships, the largest of

its kind ever, near Alaska in August 2023 (see Mahadzir 2023), China seemingly has not supplied combat weaponry to Russia for use against Ukraine. However, there are still suspicions that China might be a source of dual-use technologies and other military-capable hardware to Russia, which could be used as components of lethal weaponry in the war in Ukraine. (See, e.g., Aarup, Panov and Busvine 2023.)

The convergence of modern Russia and China, aiming to reshape the world order, has a history spanning at least a quarter of a century. At the highest level of the relationship between these two nations, this process commenced with the signing of the *Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order* in Moscow on 23 April 1997 by Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin. (Joint Declaration 1997) The first sentence of the *Declaration* sets the course for their collaborative efforts to challenge the West-ruled liberal democratic world order. It serves as the fundamental principle guiding the subsequent bilateral agreements and statements as follows:

In a spirit of partnership, the Parties shall strive to promote the multipolarisation of the world and the establishment of a new international order.

Such efforts have increasingly come to define Russia's and China's foreign policy during the early decades of the 21st century. The Declaration undeniably echoed the 'Primakov Doctrine' of Russia, formulated in the late 1990s and named after Yevgeny Primakov, who served as foreign and prime minister in Boris Yeltsin's administration. The doctrine emphasised Russia's opposition to NATO expansion, the promotion of a multipolar world order to replace the U.S. (Western) hegemony and the cultivation of a partnership with China. These core principles continue to be major pillars of Russian foreign policy today. (See, e.g., Rumer 2019)

Despite the hopes of the West, the Sino-Russian 'comprehensive strategic partnership' has shown no signs of weakening during the period of the Russian war in Ukraine. There's no apparent indication of China 'distancing' itself from Russia in any manner. High-level visits, including the visit of China's President Xi Jinping to Moscow in March 2023, along with related statements, not only confirm but reinforce these former developments.

China's stance on the deepening partnership with Russia was summarised by Li Haidong, a professor at the Institute of International Relations at the China Foreign Affairs University, in his comments on the Xi-Putin meeting for the CCP mouthpiece *Global Times* (Bai and Yang 2023):

The Ukraine crisis and the worsening ties between Russia and the West cannot affect the development of China-Russia ties and this is the key message sent to the world.

On the other side, the developments in Sino-Russian relations and their partnership indicate that China is assuming an increasingly dominant role within the partnership, forming a kind of 'perfect imbalance' as described in Una Alexandra Bērziņa-Čerenkov's book (Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2023). Nevertheless, both countries still need each other's support to form a solid counterbalance to the U.S. and its Western allies in the struggle for global dominance. In this regard, the significance of the narrative surrounding the Sino-Russian 'strategic partnership' should not be underestimated or disregarded. The author states:

The pragmatism of the two countries in the twenty-first century means that they are defined more by how they see common enemies than because they have any profound sense of alignment with each other. (Ibid., ix)

2. CHINA'S POTENTIAL GAINS FROM THE WAR IN UKRAINE

The question of whether Chinese leadership was aware of Russia's plan to attack Ukraine in February 2022 and whether Xi Jinping endorsed it, most likely remains unsolved, at least as long as the current leadership in Beijing remains in power. As of now, we can only rely on speculative analysis. If Xi and his inner circle were indeed informed about Putin's plan, they may have shared miscalculations regarding Russia's swift success and replacing Ukrainian leadership with a regime acceptable to Russia. Nevertheless, such a scenario could have aligned with China's interest, as a shift of Ukraine into the Western sphere of influence was

not in China's best interest. Therefore, supporting Russia's actions to counteract this shift was the most logical stand for China in this situation. China stood to gain more than it would lose from this situation and it acted accordingly. In its internal communications, China fully aligned with Russia's stance, while on the international stage, it maintained a restrained approach in its political statements while still affirming its loyalty to the strategic partnership with Russia.

Russia's failure to swiftly solve the 'Ukrainian problem' created a complex situation for China's regime. They needed to figure out how to maintain their partnership with Russia without losing face or risking harm to economic and trade ties with the West, which are of paramount importance for China's economy and political stability.

Over time, China has developed an approach that combines skilled diplomacy with lip service support for a peaceful political solution to the Ukrainian crisis. On one hand, it calls on the warring sides to engage in negotiations. Simultaneously, it places blame on the West for supplying combat weaponry to Ukraine which, according to China's rhetoric, escalates the conflict and compels Ukraine to continue fighting. With this approach, the so-called China's 'peace plan' was unveiled on the first anniversary of the commencement of the war in Ukraine. Officially titled *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*⁷, it was not enthusiastically received by both Ukrainian authorities and Western allies. The plan was criticized for not providing any rational answers but only vague ideological and pro-Russian statements.

This agenda, however, was received with sympathy among China's partners in Asia, Africa and South America, as well as in a few European countries and political circles. Leaders and spokespersons from major European countries began urging China to use its influence on Russia to exhort its leaders to stop the war and enter into meaningful peace negotiations with Ukraine.

⁷ 關於政治解決烏克蘭危機的中國立場 *guān yú zhèng zhì jiě jué wū kè lán wéi jī de zhōng guó lì chāng*
https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202302/t20230224_11030707.shtml English version see: China's Position 2023.

We might well agree with the opinion of American analyst Nick Danby, who derides the ‘forlorn hope’ of certain European statesmen relying on China’s goodwill to bring an end to the war in Ukraine. Danby stated:

In post-summit statements Xi may pay lip service to ‘peace talks’ and the reprehensibility of nuclear war, but European desires that he coax Putin into ending the war will keep falling on deaf ears. (Danby 2023)

For China and Chairman Xi, it’s a sign of status when European leaders visit Beijing to seek their favour. In these moments, China perceives a boost in its position and has already gained something notably significant from the war in Ukraine – increased international prestige. On one hand, China uses this situation to strengthen its control and influence over Russia, while on the other hand, it manipulates the West, particularly some European countries, to keep its side and distance from the U.S., thus gaining even more global influence. Therefore, in China’s best interest, it is to keep the ongoing Ukrainian war as a low-intensity conflict that gives it several advantages. Firstly, in the long term, this approach aims to weaken Russia while preventing its collapse. With a friendly government, abundant energy and raw material resources and considerable military forces and nuclear capabilities, Russia could still serve as a valuable strategic partner for China. Secondly, to build trust in European countries in China as a reliable partner and bolster economic cooperation, thereby expanding its influence and reducing Europe’s dependency on the U.S. Thirdly, the war in Ukraine exhausts U.S. military capabilities and hampers its ability to operate effectively in the Indo-Pacific region. This, in turn, positions China to gain more control in the region and globally, paving the way to establish the new world order with its own set of rules - China’s long-term aim.

CONCLUSIONS

(1) As a global player, China is not merely seeking involvement in the peace process in Ukraine; it aspires to be a leading player, offering an alternative approach that concurs with the Western perspective. While the Western approach insists on the victory of Ukraine and the withdrawal of Russian military forces from the occupied territories of

Ukraine as a necessary precondition for peace talks, China is striving to shape an alternative narrative.

(2) In the Ukrainian peace process, China is adhering to its strategic partnership with Russia, backing it politically and economically to counteract Western sanctions and other restrictive measures imposed on Russia to force it to stop the war and retreat from the occupied territories of Ukraine.

(3) China's interest lies in strengthening its ties with Russia and deepening Russia's dependence on China, all while preserving Russia's military and nuclear capabilities. This is necessary to establish a solid counterbalance to the U.S. and its allies, with the long-term goal of supplanting the U.S. as the world leader and the primary guarantor of the existing rules-based world order.

(4) China is pursuing its global strategy through an array of political, economic and military measures, with the ultimate objective of becoming the sole global superpower and establishing a new world order with its own set of rules. Its 'strategic partnership' with Russia and its involvement in its version of the Ukrainian peace process are just a few of the many components of China's present-day policies. However, these components hold significant importance and China constantly underscores them to remind the West and the Global South of its global ambitions, seeking to garner support for its objectives.

Contact:

Märt Läänemets, PhD

Estonian Academy of Security Sciences

E-mail: mart.laanemets@sisekaitse.ee

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