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Keeping Moscow Onside Beijing's Main Priority in Ukraine

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

-  Beijing regards Moscow as its long-term strategic partner in reshaping the international order and therefore has no serious intention of contradicting Moscow's interests in Ukraine. Despite the contradictions with Beijing's emphasis on territorial sovereignty as a key principle of the international order, it has provided vital economic and diplomatic support to Moscow in waging its war against Ukraine.
-  Ending the war in Ukraine is not a priority for Beijing, and it will not act against Moscow's interests to bring this about.
-  The Ukraine war is mainly utilised by Beijing in multilateral forums to criticise the US-led "liberal international order" and present its own approaches to global governance, especially its "Global Security Initiative", as a more viable alternative to preserve global peace.
-  Despite scepticism in the West and among its allies in the Indo-Pacific region, China's narratives about the war have found a more receptive audience among Global South elites, as seen in joint declarations between Beijing and various Global South governments regarding the war.
-  China's approach to the Ukraine war indicates that the willingness to improve relations with Europe is not prioritised at the expense of keeping Moscow on-side. This remains true despite the major changes brought by US President Donald Trump's unpredictable foreign policy.

Keywords

Ukraine War

*Peace
Negotiations*

China

Russia

*Donald
Trump*

*European
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Introduction – Beijing’s vision of a new global security order

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 occurred at a time when Beijing had already been working on promoting its newest vision of a future global order through a series of “Global Initiatives”. The “Global Development Initiative”, introduced by Xi Jinping in 2021, was the first installment of this tripartite series. The “Global Security Initiative” (GSI) was put forward by Xi Jinping at the annual Bo’ao Forum in April 2022, approximately two months after Russia launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. ^[1] In 2023, this was also followed by the so-called “Global Civilisation Initiative” introduced by Xi Jinping.

While Xi Jinping did not mention the Ukraine war in his keynote speech at the Bo’ao Forum 2022, where the Global Security Initiative was announced, it was already referenced in some early key documents under the names “Ukraine crisis” (乌克兰危机) and “Ukraine issue” (乌克兰问题). Such documents include an article by Foreign Minister Wang Yi published in the People’s Daily a few days after Xi’s keynote speech at Bo’ao 2022. ^[2] A longer elaboration of the Global Security Initiative is found in a so-called “concept paper” (概念文件) published by the government-owned Xinhua News Agency in February 2023. ^[3]

The Global Security Initiative set the main guidelines for China’s approach to the Ukraine war in the subsequent years. The main principles, such as the dual emphasis on upholding the principles of territorial sovereignty as found in the U.N. Charter, while at the same time calling for the respect of “legitimate security concerns” (合理安全关切) of other states, were laid down in the speeches and documents related to the Initiative. In 2024, a major progress

report on the implementation of the GSI was published by the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) and other state-affiliated think tanks, praising the supposed successes of the GSI. Here, the two principles are also mentioned side-by-side. [4]

Beijing's approach to Ukraine's territorial sovereignty thus represents a major contradiction in the Chinese government's self-framing as respecting and upholding the UN Charter on territorial sovereignty. Beijing regularly promotes itself as a defender of sovereignty in the UN. [5] The Chinese leadership is especially vocal about the principle of territorial sovereignty when it comes to defending its territorial claims over Taiwan. [6] An overview of China's UN voting patterns by the Germany-based Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) indicates that, to some extent, Beijing has distanced itself from Moscow in UN votes in recent years. [7] Yet, Beijing's lack of willingness to put any significant diplomatic and economic pressure on Moscow regarding Ukraine, and its refusal to publicly criticise Moscow for launching the full-scale war, indicate that *realpolitik* still takes precedence over principle-based considerations among China's leadership.

Position papers and statements on the war

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Beijing has issued several key documents introducing its position on the Ukraine war. One of the early documents was the so-called "Four Shoulds" (四个应该) published in March 2022. The document emphasised the broad principles of respecting territorial integrity, upholding the UN Charter, respecting the "legitimate security concerns" of other parties, and supporting all efforts leading to peace. [8]

In February 2023, Beijing released a "12-point position paper" on resolving what is officially called the "Ukraine crisis" (乌克兰危机). In official Chinese sources, the document can be seen as a further elaboration on the principles emphasised by Beijing in the earlier "Four Shoulds". Some of the points include generally agreed-upon principles such as the avoidance of using nuclear weapons in the conflict and the avoidance of targeting nuclear facilities as part of the conflict. Others are more specific to the advancement of Beijing's own geopolitical agenda, such as the points emphasising the "abandoning of Cold War mentality [and of military 'bloc formation']" and "stopping unilateral sanctions". The document does not represent a "peace plan" as it avoids outlining any concrete steps leading to the end of hostilities. [9]

The subsequent issuing of a "Four Principles" statement by Beijing following Xi Jinping's meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in April 2024 included the security of trade routes and supply chains as one of the four principles. [10] The so-called "Six-Point Consensus" jointly issued by the Brazilian and Chinese governments in May 2024 reiterated largely the same positions as the earlier documents. It was nevertheless seen as an important step for Beijing to gain the official support of a major Global South nation and BRICS member state. [11] Meanwhile, in September 2024, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky rejected the six-point statement in a speech given at the UN, criticising it for its pro-Kremlin biases. [12]

Beijing's "Peace Diplomacy"

Apart from the position papers and official statements, since 2023, Beijing has dispatched its "Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs," Li Hui, four times to visit Russia, Ukraine, and a number of European and other states to advance negotiations on ending the Ukraine war. The first two missions of Li Hui involved negotiations in Kyiv, Moscow, Brussels, Berlin, Paris, and Warsaw. Li's diplomatic missions were met with a high degree of scepticism among analysts in EU countries. His perceived close ties to Moscow, including his 10-year-long appointment as PRC ambassador in Moscow, were highlighted in this context. Besides that, the "window-dressing" nature of the engagements, with little substantial effort to bring an end to the conflict, was also noted by various observers. [13]

It is telling in this context that the last two trips of Li Hui did not involve Ukraine, Russia, and European nations but Global South nations instead. Beijing's intention to push for peace in Ukraine is questionable in light of this, while its intention to capitalise on the war to build its image as a "responsible stakeholder" in the Global South seems to be an important factor. Global South leaders who subscribed to Beijing's narratives likely had economic motivations as well, such as concerns about rising wheat prices as a result of the war. [14] Li Hui's visits to Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia involved further statements on the importance of finding a negotiated solution to the war and voiced concerns about its global spillover effects. [15] While doing little in terms of achieving peace in Ukraine, Beijing thus scored diplomatic gains among Global South elites via Li Hui's shuttle diplomacy. This was also demonstrated by the subsequent establishment of a "Friends for Peace" group in the UN involving 17 Global South countries, co-chaired by Chinese FM Wang Yi and his Brazilian counterpart Mauro Vieira. [16]

Lack of economic and diplomatic pressure on Moscow

From the EU's point of view, China's approach to the Ukraine war should be evaluated not only based on what the Beijing government did but also on what it did not do. Beijing never issued a clear condemnation of Moscow for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and increased its economic interaction with Russia in the subsequent years. In 2024, China-Russia trade hit a record high, based on Chinese customs data. [17] Meanwhile, in Chinese government sources, the bilateral relations between the two countries were regularly described as "maintaining normal ties" [18] with Moscow, and as "not targeting / not affected by any third party". [19]

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the storm of Western sanctions on Russia, China has also proved crucial to Russia's wartime economy by providing a large amount of civilian-military dual-use goods. Based on data from the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China (GACC) analysed by MERICS, the main dual-use goods exported to Russia by China include "general computing and telecommunications hardware", "advanced electronic and communication components", and "semiconductor and electronics

manufacturing and testing components". [20] The definitions of "dual-use goods" here are based on the Common High Priority Items (CHPI) List, a collaborative effort developed by the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and Japan. [21]

By exporting large amounts of dual-use goods, Beijing aims to support Moscow's war efforts in Ukraine while at the same time not crossing the red line of being a direct military supporter of Moscow. Becoming a direct military supporter of Moscow would likely provoke a major sanctions war between Beijing and the West and its allies in East Asia. Unlike North Korea and Iran, countries that have been under Western sanctions for decades, Beijing apparently sees too much economic risk in this scenario. Meanwhile, in the autumn of 2024, an increasing number of intelligence sources indicated that Russia is producing some of its military drones in a Chinese factory. [22]

The Chinese and Russian governments' bilateral exchanges reached an especially high level since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Putin and Xi met or spoke via phone ten times between February 2022 and February 2025, and their foreign ministers met or spoke via phone almost on a monthly basis during the same time period. This is more than with any other foreign counterpart for both countries. [23] At the same time, exchanges between Beijing and the Ukrainian leadership were by far more limited. Xi has had one phone conversation with Zelensky since the outbreak of the full-scale war. The only in-person high-level meeting of a Ukrainian foreign minister with their Chinese counterpart was during former FM Dmytro Kuleba's meeting with Wang Yi in July 2024. During his trip to China, Kuleba was not received in Beijing but in Guangzhou instead, after visiting Hong Kong as part of his trip. [24] Kuleba and Wang had some further in-person meetings on the sidelines of multilateral events, such as the Munich Security Conference 2024. [25]

Apart from the economic support, indirect military support, and the high frequency of top-level bilateral exchanges between Moscow and Beijing, the Chinese leadership has also actively supported Moscow in multilateral forums. Moscow has thus managed to maintain a high visibility among non-Western nations via Chinese-initiated multilateral institutions such as BRICS+ [26] and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). [27] The most prominent recent multilateral forum was the 2024 BRICS Summit held in Kazan, Russia, also attended by Indian PM Narendra Modi and other top leaders from various member states. The summit highlighted the absence of Moscow's isolation from Global South countries and the major role played by Chinese-initiated institutions in this regard. [28]

This was further demonstrated by Xi Jinping being Putin's guest of honour at the 80th Victory Day parade in Moscow. Brazilian President Lula da Silva and more than 20 other world leaders were also received by Putin during the Victory Day festivities, with Slovakia's PM Robert Fico being the only EU leader among Putin's guests. [29]

Latest trends since Donald Trump's return to power

Since Donald Trump's return to power and his push for a quick end to the Ukraine war, the actions and statements of the Trump administration on the issue have dominated much of the international media attention. Beijing's actions are currently receiving little attention, and the Chinese leadership has mostly been in a reactive mode on the issue. Chinese government officials, including FM Wang Yi, have made some statements calling for Europe's participation in the Ukraine peace process. [30] Meanwhile, Beijing's decision to appoint Lu Shaye, a controversial "wolf warrior" diplomat who earlier called into question the sovereignty of Central Asia's post-Soviet states, as the new Special Representative for European Affairs sends an arguably less friendly message to Brussels. [31] Lu also made some comments aimed at highlighting transatlantic divisions, calling Washington's treatment of its allies "appalling", while at the same time reiterating the call for Europe's participation in Ukraine's peace negotiations. [32]

Beijing's main priority, however, remains keeping Moscow as a close ally and avoiding a "reverse Kissinger" scenario, where the U.S. aligns with Russia to counter China. [33] While many analysts see this analogy as flawed [34], The comparison to the 1970s U.S.-China rapprochement against the Soviet Union is widely discussed now and seems to worry China's leadership as well. Xi Jinping's phone call to Vladimir Putin on the third anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine indicates that Beijing wants to make sure Moscow will not leave its orbit. On the same day that leaders of several Western countries (not including the US) were in Kyiv to mark the third anniversary of the war, China's top leader used the occasion to reaffirm the strong ties between Beijing and Moscow. While commending dialogue between Washington and Moscow, as well as the positive steps towards peace in Ukraine, the readout by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the phone call also emphasised that China and Russia "cannot be moved apart". [35]

Conclusion - What to Expect?

The Chinese government's approach to the Ukraine war is part of Beijing's long-term strategy to curb what is seen as the "global hegemony" of the United States and build an alternative global order more suitable to Beijing's worldviews and interests. The partnership with Moscow plays an important role in this, and the Ukraine war is seen mainly from this perspective in Beijing.

Achieving peace in Ukraine is not a priority for Beijing, and the war is mainly referenced in multilateral forums by Beijing to popularise its own approach to global security. This approach, which in recent years has been summarised in the "Global Security Initiative", promotes the idea that US hegemonism and NATO expansion are at the core of global conflicts, while Beijing offers a better alternative for global peace and prosperity. Despite scepticism in the West and among its allies in the Indo-Pacific region, Beijing's world-making efforts

have had more success in the Global South, as also seen from joint statements issued on the Ukraine war by China and the governments of various Global South countries.

The recent trends since Donald Trump's return to power indicate that Beijing also has an interest in utilising transatlantic divisions for its own benefit. Meanwhile, the main priority of the Chinese leadership remains to preserve its close ties with Moscow. Maintaining dialogue with Beijing and emphasising the EU's position about the Ukraine war is important, but Europe should not be naive about Beijing putting any major effort into bringing a just end to the war. Beijing will likely continue to provide crucial economic and diplomatic support to Russia, while it will not take decisive steps towards ending the Ukraine war in any way that seriously contradicts Moscow's interests.

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