

CHINA AND UKRAINE: THE CHINESE DEBATE ABOUT RUSSIA'S WAR AND ITS MEANING FOR THE WORLD

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SUMMARY

- Interviews with Chinese thinkers show they largely do not regard the war as a major break with the past, but as another manifestation of their country's longstanding rivalry with the US.
- Intellectuals believe America is using the war to encircle China – but that Washington has failed to rally many others internationally behind its cause.
- Most are critical of Russia's tactics but want to stand by Moscow to prevent the US winning.
- On Taiwan, Western support for Ukraine has neither deterred nor encouraged an invasion. But scholars are scouring the American and European responses to the war for clues to how the West might respond to a potential escalation over Taiwan.
- Perhaps most radically, the war may accelerate Chinese efforts to become less economically intertwined with the West.

Change is upon us

“Change is coming that hasn’t happened in 100 years and we are driving this change together.” These were the words of Xi Jinping, China’s leader and the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, when bidding farewell to his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in Moscow in March 2023. Putin was the first foreign leader Xi met after the latter had secured his precedent-breaking third term in power. Xi was also the first to shake hands with the Russian president following the International Criminal Court’s issue of an arrest warrant accusing him of war crimes.

China and Russia had already issued a joint declaration in 2022, which pledged “no limits” to their friendship. So, how has Russia’s all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – and the conduct of the war since then – changed China’s support for Russia and its wider outlook on the world? What assumptions may be shaping official statements of neutrality and abstentions in the United Nations?

This policy brief sets out to understand the ways in which China’s political and intellectual elites see the war in Ukraine. It draws four key lessons from more than 30 off-the-record interviews undertaken by the authors with Chinese thinkers and strategists in top universities, think-tanks, and party-affiliated organs, and from the study of articles and debates in the Chinese foreign policy community. Their views are complemented by an analysis of official Chinese documents and an extensive literature review of academic journals and media accounts relating to the war in Ukraine.

When individuals are quoted, this is based on their publications available in open access. While the views of these intellectuals cannot be taken as a proxy for positions adopted by the Chinese government, they do shed light on the questions under debate and the way in which these events are being framed in China.

Xi’s parting message to Putin in Moscow echoed one of his favourite slogans: “great changes unseen in a century”. This prominent notion in Chinese Communist Party newspeak alludes to deep geopolitical shifts taking place globally that present opportunities for China, as well as challenges. While for the collective West, Russia’s war on Ukraine marks a historical caesura, for Chinese observers it is just one illustration of the profound changes taking place in the world.

The four lessons we have identified put the war firmly into a bigger worldview.

Lesson 1: America is using the war in Ukraine to encircle China – but it has failed to rally the world

Chinese intellectuals are largely united in seeing the US as the biggest source of instability in the international arena: they describe American foreign policy as conducive to generating chaos around the world. This view is long held and the war in Ukraine has, if anything, only strengthened this belief. Observers in China have also argued for years that ‘great power competition’ between Washington and Beijing is inevitable, given the United States’ relative decline and China’s rise. Although Chinese thinkers expect their country to continue to grow in strength, they believe that American decision-makers’ response to the war nevertheless poses a major threat to their country. Many think that America is instrumentalising the war in Ukraine and NATO’s involvement in the conflict as part of its efforts to contain not only Russia, but also China. In fact, several scholars actually present the war in Ukraine as a proxy conflict between China and the US, with both sides drawing benefits from their positions.

They support their arguments by pointing to developments such as the presence of Japan and South Korea at the 2022 NATO summit in Madrid and the description of China as a security challenge in the organisation’s latest strategic concept. In this regard, Chinese thinkers suspect that US-led initiatives targeting Russia in Europe share the same motivation as similar efforts made by the US against China in the Indo-Pacific region through the Quad, AUKUS, and other initiatives. They believe that Washington is using the crisis to build more connections between its allies in the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic region. One scholar even compares US success in persuading Japan and South Korea to support sanctions on Russia to American pressure on Germany to remove Huawei from its 5G systems, and to the Netherlands’ decision to prevent Dutch semiconductor companies from exporting products to China.

In most Chinese scholars’ eyes, Washington is benefiting from the war in Ukraine. They cite booming energy trade between the US and the EU in the wake of sanctions. In doing so they are reflecting one of the most widely used talking points in Chinese state-affiliated media, which is that Europe is having to pay the ultimate cost of the war. Scholars apply similar logic to what they consider to be the gains of the American military-industrial complex – also a familiar refrain in Chinese debates, which its proponents believe confirms the discredited nature of the US and its motives. As Wang Zhen, a foreign policy expert from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, put it, “hyping up Russia’s so-called aggressive role in the conflict and supporting Ukraine both militarily and strategically will earn the Joe Biden

administration a lot of political advantage, notwithstanding the fact that the conflict has proved lucrative for a host of US energy companies and the military-industrial complex, which are the very entities the US politicians are trying to please.”

Experts suggest there is little prospect of improving US-China ties but also share a belief that time is on their side – and that the US does not necessarily have as many friends as it presumes in the escalating rivalry. They suggest that the very breakout of the war testifies to the failure of US-led institutions and their deterrence capabilities. One senior scholar argued that American expansionism in the post-cold war era created a “global feudalism” – a fragmented system in which the US imposes its rules on third countries without providing stability and public goods to all parties, especially in the global south. Although scholars agree that the US is still able to rally its traditional allies, they judge it to have failed to win the hearts and minds of many people in African, Latin American, and Asian countries. Indeed, as one Chinese intellectual noted, in contrast to the cold war, the West has met with little success at mobilising developing countries behind its cause. He claims that a total of 157 countries support neither the West nor China on the question of Ukraine.

Many scholars argue that China is right not to emulate Washington’s activism – for example, mobilising around the idea of defence of democracy – by trying to build a counter-alliance. They support Beijing’s positioning of remaining neutral as a way to further build support in the global south that does not want to be drawn into the war. Capitalising on America’s reputational weakness and winning over these ‘non-aligned’ countries has thus become a key objective of Chinese foreign policy. In this context, China’s so-called “peace plan” for Ukraine, presented by its foreign ministry just before the first anniversary of the Russian invasion, is best understood as a sop to these countries – an attempt to win the battle of narratives with the West.

This battle for the global south extends well beyond the question of the war on Ukraine. As an alternative to American “feudalism”, Beijing has devised its own offerings in the form of its Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and most recently in March 2023, Global Civilisation Initiative. By proposing a plethora of loose cooperation formats, Beijing wants to portray itself as much more inclusive than the US, with a special focus on showing that political and economic development does not equate to Westernisation. This framing can also be found in the comments of many Chinese intellectuals, who claim that Beijing wants to build a more pluralistic world made up of multiple centres of power. Some even argue that the war in Ukraine has already marked the world’s entry into this multipolar reality.

Lesson 2: China has more to gain than to lose from standing by Russia – and Moscow is now very much Beijing’s junior partner

Beijing’s initial responses to Russia’s war on Ukraine – for example, its decision not to evacuate Chinese citizens from Ukraine until the invasion had already started – suggested that China’s leadership might have believed Russia would be able to carry out a swift and effective ‘special military operation’. It later appears to have realised its overestimation of Putin’s ability to correctly assess the situation in Ukraine.

The Chinese debate about how to deal with Russia contains two conflicting tendencies. On the one hand, there is clear frustration with Moscow on a tactical level. Almost all of the intellectuals interviewed commented on Russia’s poor military performance, some with palpable derision. Quite a few seemed to think that Russia no longer merited great power status. Unable to secure a decisive victory, Moscow has engaged in what Ding Xiaoxing, an expert with a Russia studies background at China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), sees as a “long-term war of attrition”. CICIR is a major think-tank with close links to the state security ministry, China’s civilian intelligence-gathering body. In a piece to mark the first anniversary of the war, Ding wrote that “due to errors in early judgment, insufficient logistical support, and unyielding Ukrainian resistance,” the Russian army was initially forced to withdraw from Kyiv and its surroundings. Intellectuals are critical of the slowness of Moscow to adjust its strategy in the face of an “anti-Russia alliance composed of more than 50 countries and regions”. Many thinkers nevertheless feel that Moscow should be able to sustain a protracted war, especially given that they also believe that war fatigue might soon start to grow in Europe and the US.

On the other hand, at the strategic level, there is a sense among thinkers that a structural logic binds China and Russia closely together. Simply put, if the US is China’s principal rival, it is crucial that America does not defeat and humiliate Russia. One prominent Chinese scholar argued that Xi’s and Putin’s political fates are intertwined. As the leaders of the two largest authoritarian states in the world, which both display revisionist ambitions, their shared goal is to reshape the US-led international order to make it safer for autocracies and the survival of their regimes.

Their shared vision of a post-Western world order constitutes the most important element of the China-Russia joint international agenda. This lessening of the hegemonic influence of the

US is what both countries call “democratisation of international relations”. They envisage cooperating to create, as the February 2022 joint declaration put it, “an even more prospering, stable, and just world”. This mindset also enables Beijing and Moscow to move beyond the elements of competition that exist between them, such as in central Asia, and advance their bilateral relations.

Tian Feilong from the Law School of Beihang University, a hard-line academic and a vocal defender of the draconian national security law imposed in Hong Kong, goes so far as to say that the war in Ukraine has accelerated joint China-Russia construction of a “multilateral democratic order” and “anti-hegemony”, both understood by Tian as a rewriting of the existing rules of the game to the detriment of the West. From this perspective, Russia appears as a rational actor, simply defending its position in the world from Western aggression, while Europe and the US seem irresponsible and antagonistic.

Meanwhile, Moscow’s grievances about NATO expansion and justifications for waging war against Ukraine seem well received and understood among Chinese intellectuals. Many of them repeat Russian lines about NATO undermining Moscow’s core security concerns through its enlargement in central and eastern Europe. For example, in the words of Shen Shishun, an Asia-Pacific expert from the China Institute of International Studies, “Russia’s strategic space has been squeezed ... forcing it to take countermeasures.” Similarly, Wang Yiwei, from the prestigious Renmin University and one of the most prominent Chinese proponents of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), asserts that the “crisis” around Ukraine is a direct response to Western countries not respecting Moscow’s security interests.

Worries about the danger of a military defeat leading to regime change in Moscow appear to inform the thinking of many scholars. Such concerns likely also underpin the Chinese government’s steady support for the Putin regime. As long as Russia’s behaviour does not become an unmanageable political liability, they expect Beijing to continue to provide Moscow with an economic and diplomatic lifeline. By and large, intellectuals agree that China and Russia need to stand together in a joint effort to weaken the US-led international order, a system that both regimes believe presents an existential threat.

Intellectuals tend not to see Ukraine as an important independent player in the struggle. This feeds into the view that a local war between Russia and Ukraine has turned into a proxy fight between America and China – the only two countries to benefit from it so far. According to this logic, China benefits from the war because it brings Russia into a more dependent position and makes the US look like a ‘war monger’. Chinese documents on the war make plentiful reference to the fact that “the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries must be effectively upheld” but never specifically refer to Russia breaching this

principle. Instead, they point towards a “complicated history” between Russia and Ukraine, which again legitimises Moscow’s perspective and hints that Russia has “legitimate security interests” in Ukraine. These beliefs are strongly shared by intellectuals in China.

Voices sceptical of Russia exist in the Chinese debate as well, although they are less common. Speaking off the record, one scholar claimed that China had been a victim of a hybrid war waged by Russia – including, for example, Russian attempts to manipulate Chinese state-affiliated media and social media as well as duping Chinese leaders into appearing more supportive of the war than they wanted to be. Some critics have even been willing to write on the record. One of the most vocal is Feng Yujun, director of the Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai. He previously spent a decade running the Institute for Russian Studies at CICIR. Feng sees Moscow an irrational actor, largely driven by a victim mentality and imperial longings. He claims that Russian foreign policy has exacerbated antagonisms between liberal and conservative forces in countries around the world, leading to a subsequent deterioration in the international environment. His views suggest that Moscow’s irrationality could one day become a liability for Beijing, especially in the context of the growing closeness between the two countries. Nevertheless, these kinds of assessments are not widespread; they certainly do not signal a qualitative change in Beijing’s position towards Moscow.

Lesson 3: The conflict in Ukraine has made war over Taiwan neither more nor less likely – but Western responses are certainly informing Chinese thinking

The decline of the West has been a longstanding part of Chinese Communist Party rhetoric. This meant that the strength of support shown by the European Union, European states, and the US to Ukraine came as a surprise to many observers in China. Both they and the Chinese government quickly rationalised this expression of solidarity as further proof of American instrumentalisation of their juniors in Europe. Nevertheless, it has not gone unnoticed by those considering the implications of Russia’s war on Ukraine for the future of Taiwan.

At the official level, China rejects analogies between the war in Ukraine and cross-strait relations. In the words of Wang Wenbin, spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Taiwan is not Ukraine” and “those who play with and fan up the fire on the Taiwan question will only wind up burning themselves.” Such views rest on the notion that the US uses the comparison with Taiwan deliberately to antagonise and, ultimately, to destabilise China’s neighbourhood.

Nevertheless, in conversations with Chinese intellectuals it becomes clear that they are looking closely at the war’s implications for China-Taiwan relations. Some note with interest that the US and NATO have refrained from engaging in a direct fight with Russia over Ukraine, and conclude from this that Western powers may also seek to avoid head-on confrontations over Taiwan. As one intellectual put it, “if the US administration’s main argument for not getting directly involved in Ukraine is to avoid a war with a nuclear-armed superpower, why should the same not logic not apply to Taiwan?”

Many believe that Washington will instead arm Taiwan following the Ukrainian model and try to outsource its war efforts to its allies in the region, especially Japan. In this context, scholars expect a rapid military build-up to take place in the Indo-Pacific, and view formats such as the Quad and AUKUS as part and parcel of US-led efforts to tilt the regional balance of power to Beijing’s disadvantage.

Some Chinese intellectuals believe that when US politicians make direct comparisons between Ukraine and Taiwan, many of them are in fact using the issue to try to reduce polarisation within US politics. They think that it suits the US to identify a shared enemy whose presence can paper over some of the internal cracks. Many in the Chinese debate point towards Washington “exporting tensions” as a way to bring people together at home.

Fudan University’s Shen Yi, a controversial public intellectual known for nationalist rhetoric, has claimed the US is instrumentalising Ukraine under the guise of a shared fight for freedom and democracy, with Kyiv naively falling for Washington’s overtures. He believes (as do some others) that the US may apply the same argument to Taiwan. For many in China, current assertive shifts in Western policy towards Beijing have nothing to do with China’s own actions, but are instead rooted in foreign countries’ hypocrisy and Sinophobia. As on Ukraine, the Chinese debate does not really regard Taiwan as an independent agent, but sees it more as a ‘pawn’ in the game of superpowers.

At the same time, most Chinese intellectuals do not think Beijing will be the first to initiate a conventional conflict over Taiwan. They argue that Xi’s responses to date have been largely reactive in nature. For example, the People’s Liberation Army conducted military drills

following the visit to Taipei of the then speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, in August 2022. Moreover, Chinese scholars seem united in their belief that intensification of informal ties between Taiwan and third countries must meet such reactions from China. They interpret these as a rational response that allows Beijing to signal where its interests lie in the face of what they perceive as Western attempts to alter the ‘One China’ policy status quo. They maintain this is also rational because China is still not as powerful as the US – in the words of one of ECFR’s interlocutors, “China can’t start a war it can’t win.” Yet, observers also suggest that a Chinese response could be more vigorous were the US or Taiwan to undertake what they refer to as a “provocation” – such as a major move that dramatically changes what they perceive as the status quo. They do not exclude the possibility of a war over Taiwan, although for the time being they believe it to be improbable.

Lesson 4: Economic interdependence will not protect China – and Beijing must prepare for sanctions

One of the biggest lessons Chinese observers have taken from the war in Ukraine is that politics and security trump economics. For many decades, the official thinking was that economic interdependence with Western powers would act as a deterrent to conflict with China. But the war in Ukraine has led some Chinese observers to question that assumption. One scholar pointed to the example of Germany as demonstrating the biggest lesson from the war: they maintain that German energy dependence on Russia ended up having no effect at all on Berlin’s foreign policy decisions. In the words of the same interlocutor, “if there is a war between the US and China, we should not expect economic interests to outweigh geopolitical ones for American allies like Germany.”

Both Chinese and Western observers would concur that global changes towards securitisation and the weaponisation of economic interdependencies started long before Russia’s invasion. But it is clear that they have accelerated significantly since the war began: in recent years, countries around the world have turned inward to protect their economies from excessive exposure to external shocks. The US has pursued this course in direct relation to China, for example by taking steps to limit Chinese growth in strategic sectors such as semiconductors and AI.

In this context, and on the basis of speaking with Chinese thinkers, it is evident that sanctions are a particular point of concern for China given the interdependencies it possesses. Beijing officially opposes unilateral sanctions, both in the context of the war in Ukraine and regarding other crises – a position it reiterated in its recent document “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis”

”. The Chinese leadership regards sanctions as counterproductive and unfair. It stresses their negative impact on developing economies including the populations of third countries, especially in the global south.

Chinese thinkers are acutely aware that the war in Ukraine increases the chances that their country could face sanctions in the future. They largely agree that the conflict has galvanised the Chinese government action to pay close attention to this question. Officials are reportedly running “stress tests”, such as modelling, to understand how China’s domestic market would fare in various scenarios involving sanctions or other measures put in place against China.

This is part of wider challenge for the Chinese state. For some time, Beijing has been preoccupied with changing the country’s development path in the face of the dual challenge of slowing growth and wider security considerations. In this regard, for several years it has pursued its “dual circulation” strategy, a model in which the domestic market becomes the mainstay, with a heavy focus on boosting internal consumption, while international trade and investment play a complementary role. As a prominent Chinese economist and the father of “new structural economics”, Justin Yifu Lin, has noted, this new paradigm “reflects a clear understanding of China’s development trend”. In other words, although international markets will still play an important role in the country’s development strategy, Beijing will be much more selective in welcoming foreign investment.

It is clear that the consequence of China’s own inward turn will be ever more strenuous efforts by the government to enhance the country’s self-reliance, especially in strategic sectors such as high tech. This was reflected during the recent National People’s Congress, which saw a major announcement of a sweeping restructuring of the Ministry of Science and Technology. The Chinese government is planning to deploy more resources to speed up the development of cutting-edge technologies, an area where China still lags far behind the US. With more restrictions on Chinese firms being imposed by Washington, this will not be an easy task to achieve. In the context of cooperation with Russia, therefore, a close relationship with Moscow that entails diversified supplies of energy and raw materials could also play an important role in meeting China’s domestic requirements.

To start to address this challenge, in a recent piece on the American and European sanctions applied against Russia during the war in Ukraine, two senior Chinese economists working for the Bank of China Research Institute recommended that Beijing should build a sanction-immune safety net by developing its own cooperation frameworks. They suggest the BRI, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement could serve this purpose. They even went so far as to propose the establishment of small banks specialising in trade with Russia and fully “decoupled”, as they termed it, from

the Western financial system. They also present the internationalisation of the renminbi as one of the pillars of a “contingency plan” that would enable China to become more financially secure in the long run. The authors suggest that further internationalisation would help protect China in the event it was cut off from the SWIFT global payments system.

Finally, some Chinese observers express a degree of quiet glee about the limited success of Western sanctions. As one expert put it, “the so-called most aggressive sanctions in history don’t seem to be having much of an impact.” In this context, it is likely that the Chinese leadership will be examining the approaches adopted by Russia to circumvent sanctions.

The changes to come

In the era of “great changes unseen in a century”, China’s leadership and Chinese intellectuals are deploying a new vocabulary to describe the geopolitical shifts under way; but there is no Chinese equivalent of a *Zeitenwende* for how the country relates to the rest of the world. Instead they see the conflict through the prism of wider global changes – and are making their decisions around those considerations rather than worrying too much about conditions within Ukraine.

While they vary in their assessments, Chinese observers of the war in Ukraine worry about the competence of a declining and potentially erratic Russia. But their fear of American victory or regime change in Moscow leads to a desire to prevent the Kremlin from failing.

At the same time, conversations with many Chinese intellectuals reveal that they identify an opportunity for Beijing to exploit Western weaknesses to make China more secure, both domestically and internationally, by expanding its ties with the global south, nurturing an image as a peace broker, and speeding up its efforts to become more economically self-reliant. And, by giving its tacit approval to the war in Ukraine while trying to present itself as neutral, China is trying to strike a balance between maintaining its pacifistic façade and the pursuit of outright revisionism.

In the economic realm, the war in Ukraine has given additional impetus to China's own efforts to become less reliant on foreign partners and more secure in the face of external shocks. Although this trend towards achieving greater self-reliance started long before Russia's aggression, the sense of urgency over preparing for sanctions now seems much higher in Beijing. The potential threat contained within economic interdependence identified by Chinese intellectuals mirrors these official concerns. Western sanctions and Russia's responses to them provide a testing ground for China's own efforts to become more resilient in the future.

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