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PUTIN IS CREATING THE MULTIPOLAR WORLD HE (THOUGHT HE) WANTED¹

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Up until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia's and China's worsening relations with the European Union and the United States meant that the world order was at risk of falling apart into two rival blocs, as during the Cold War: Europeans and Americans against Russians and Chinese.² Since 24 February 2022, that is not so clear anymore. The more Russia escalates the violence in Ukraine, but also the strategic anxiety (by putting its nuclear forces on alert), the more difficult it becomes for other powers to stay completely aloof, let alone to simply align with Russia. The more EU and US sanctions reverberate throughout the global economy, the more it becomes impossible for other powers to avoid going at least partially along. China in particular has in fact already made a defining choice.

The Kingdom in the Middle

China's instinct when other powers go to war is to avoid taking any explicit stance.³ When Russia is involved, China will not always openly support it, but it will hardly ever openly go against it (and vice versa).⁴ Judging from a quotation from the *China National Defense Newspaper* in the *People's Daily* on 11 February 2022, China at first, indeed, distinctly leant towards Russia, blaming the US and NATO for the tensions, and ridiculing the American warning that large-scale

invasion was imminent.⁵ Many even suspected collusion, assuming that Vladimir Putin must have informed Xi Jinping of his plans while in Beijing for the Winter Olympics.

Putin likely did warn Xi of impending action, but, judging from reports in Chinese official media, China appears to have been taken by surprise by the scale of the actual invasion. Initial media reports spoke of "trouble in Eastern Ukraine" and largely ignored the assault on Kyiv.⁶ This is also evidenced by how China bumbled the evacuation of its citizens from Ukraine, leading to derision on Chinese social media. Initially Chinese citizens were urged to proudly display the Chinese flag when they went out, so as to prevent Russian fire. After a few days, however, Beijing implicitly admitted that this might provoke violence, due to increasing anti-Chinese sentiment in Ukraine, and by the third day of the invasion, it advised citizens to remain indoors and hide their identities instead,⁷ before finally recommending evacuation via Moldova.⁸

As the war unfolded, China's public stance began to evolve. On 25 February already, China (along with India and the United Arab Emirates) abstained from the vote in the UN Security Council on the draft resolution condemning Russia; only Russia itself voted against. The Chinese ambassador explained

the abstention by the need for caution, adding that “Ukraine should be a bridge between the East and the West, not an outpost for major powers”.⁹ The *Liberation Daily*, the newspaper of the Committee of the Chinese Communist Party of Shanghai, reported that on the same day, in a telephone conversation between Xi and Putin, the former again expressed understanding for Russia’s “reasonable security concerns”, and stated that “China supports the Russian side to solve their problems with the Ukrainian side through negotiations”, while also referring to respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries.¹⁰ On 1 March, foreign minister Wang Yi spoke with his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba, stating that “China deplors the outbreak of a conflict between Ukraine and Russia, calls on Ukraine and Russia to find a solution to the problem through negotiations, supports all constructive international efforts conducive to a political solution, and is extremely concerned about the harm suffered by civilians”.¹¹

As to the sanctions, the Chinese foreign ministry stated that “China is not in favour of using sanctions to solve problems”.¹² Beijing is unlikely to follow the EU and the US in freezing Russian reserves or to halt trade with the country. But it cannot totally avoid the impact of the sanctions either. The Bank of China’s Singapore branch, for example, is but one of several banks that has stopped financing trade in Russian commodities, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has frozen all its activities in Russia and Belarus.

A Multipolar World

This does not mean that China is now “on the side” of the EU and the US. But, set against the backdrop of Western fears that China might abuse the moment to revert to force of arms itself to change the status quo concerning Taiwan, Beijing’s actual position is very restrained. Those fears did not take into account, in any case, that the last time China went to war was against Vietnam in 1979. Going to war now would completely overturn the world’s perception of China, therefore, and the potential impact on all of its

international relations would be immense. While by no means impossible, it would certainly be an enormous gamble.¹³

Silent pragmatism puts China on the side of its own interests. What that does mean, is that we are in a truly multipolar world. Each of the current four global players pursues its own interests; these interests overlap more often with those of some than of others, but they do not overlap completely. In the end, therefore, each of the four cooperates, or not, with each of the other four, as its interests dictate. China and Russia regard each other as close partners against perceived American hegemony. At the same time, China’s often very assertive yet mainly politico-economic strategy requires a degree of stability. Now especially the CCP needs to project stability, as it is preparing for the expected re-election of Xi Jinping as General-Secretary later this year. Russia, in contrast, is pursuing an aggressive politico-military strategy that allows it to make the most of its resources in conditions of instability.

Beijing welcomes Russian military interventions that preserve stability, like recently in Kazakhstan. But a war (and, after some initial reluctance, as of early March Chinese media seem willing to call it just that)¹⁴ that destroys a country seen as a major hub for the Belt and Road Initiative, and that provokes a global economic shockwave, is hardly in China’s interest. This reality explains the following opinion in the *Liberation Daily* of 2 March: “Ukraine’s renewed application to become member of the EU at this time is not unexpected. The EU is an economic integration organization, not a military one, and Ukraine will legitimately receive more economic support after joining the EU, without stepping on Russia’s ‘red line’”.¹⁵

Putin regularly clamoured for multipolarity, but what he really meant was an end to perceived American unipolarity. What he did not want, but has now provoked, is an international arena ruled by actual multipolarity, in which he has to compete for the support of other states. Only to find out

that he can coerce only a very few into aligning, and that he has little to attract the others, while his brutal aggression has shaken the equipoise even of those inclined to favour his version of events.

In a multipolar world, the EU strategy of dealing with other powers as partner, competitor, and rival all at once, is the right one. Great powers traditionally compartmentalise their relations: they cooperate where they can, but push back when they must. Even towards Russia, after the initial 2014 invasion of Ukraine, the EU kept signalling that it was willing to cooperate in areas where interests coincided. Russia declined. By launching a war of aggression, it has now finally made compartmentalisation impossible, and forced the EU to reduce all relations to a minimum.

Chinese support for (eventual) EU membership of Ukraine, while resolutely backing Russian opposition to NATO membership,¹⁶ shows that China is still looking to compartmentalize its relations with the West. This is no surprise. After all, by also applying compartmentalisation to China, in spite of all the recent frictions, the EU, and even to a large degree the US, have enabled it to assume the position that it has today. Had they not done so, and treated China exclusively as a rival, Beijing may have seen no other option than to fully align with Russia. Instead, China currently has too much at stake to opt for such a choice. Now is not the time, therefore, to overplay the “democrats vs autocrats” narrative: The West needs some of the world’s other autocrats to help dam in their Russian colleague.

Conclusion: One World

Will China eventually play a more active role in solving this crisis? That it could provide Russia an economic lifeline may actually be in the interest of the EU and US. Western sanctions are intended to hurt, to signal to Russia and to the world at large that violating the core rules of the international order comes at a price. But they are not meant to make Russia collapse, which might provoke escalatory behaviour – remember Japan’s

reaction to the US oil embargo that crippled its economy in 1941: the attack on Pearl Harbor. Continued trade with China could prevent such an apocalyptic outcome.

At the same time, Beijing could make use of that relationship to signal its discomfort to Moscow behind the scenes and prove itself to be a “responsible stake holder”. A public mediation initiative would carry the prospect of great diplomatic prestige, but comes without any guarantee for success, and thus runs counter to China’s risk-avert instincts on the international stage. A private message from Xi to Putin that expresses his hopes that this war ends soon, however, might be just as effective.

The fact is that by its stance to this date, China has already made a defining choice. Had China fully supported Russia in its war of aggression it may well have tipped the world into a new bipolar rivalry. Instead, there is still a chance to keep the world together, to maintain one set of rules that all states subscribe to, because to pursue its interests, China needs the stability that these rules create. Russia has put itself outside that order for now, but the aim must be to bring it too back into the fold eventually. Only a world order that includes all great powers of the day can be truly stable. China’s self-interest may just overlap enough with our self-interest to make it happen.

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¹ This piece was published earlier in March 2022 as a [security policy brief for the Egmont Institute](#).

² See: Frank Gaenssmantel, “China’s Rise and the Geopolitical Identity of the European Union,” In: Bart Dessein (ed.), *Interpreting China as a Regional and Global Power. Nationalism and Historical Consciousness in World Politics*, (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 271-292.

³ Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *Haunted by Chaos. China’s Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping*, Cambridge MA and London, (Harvard University Press, 2018), p.218, characterises Chinese foreign policy as, at heart, “defensive.”

⁴ Dmitri Trenin, “[How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post- Pandemic Bipolar World.](#)” Commentary, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, May 1, 2020.

⁵ *China National Defense Newspaper (Zhongguo guofang bao)* cited in the *People’s Daily (Renmin ribao)* of February 11, 2022: “U.S. ‘adds oil to the fire’ of tensions in Ukraine” (美给乌克兰紧张局势‘火上浇油’). Also see *Renmin ribao*, February 21, 2022: “Biden says Russia ‘has decided to invade Ukraine’, Germany, Ukraine do not agree” (拜登称俄罗斯‘已决定入侵乌克兰’ 德国、乌克兰不附和).

⁶ See: *Jiefang ribao*, February 26, 2022, small frontpage column: “Xi Jinping talks with Putin on the phone, focusing on exchanging views on the current situation in Ukraine. Supports Russia and Ukraine to solve their problems through negotiation” (习近平同普京通电话·重点就当前乌克兰局势交换意见---支持俄方同乌方通过谈判解决问题). The article commences with the statement that “recently, the situation in eastern Ukraine has changed dramatically...” (近期, 乌克兰东部地区局势急剧变化...; emphasis ours).

⁷ Radio France Internationale, February 26, 2022: “Chinese embassy in Ukraine changed their dispatch: from brightly showing the national flag to hiding one’s identity” (中国驻乌使馆改通知：从亮出国旗改为身份保密).

⁸ As of 5 March, despite the Chinese embassy’s (belated) efforts, there were still multiple accounts – both anonymous and identified – of Chinese exchange students stuck in bomb shelters, and even, casualties. See for instance *Voice of America*, March 5, 2022: “China’s Ukraine Evacuation delayed, Chinese nationals injured, about 200 students trapped in bomb shelters” (中国乌克兰撤侨行动迟缓·中国公民受伤·约二百学生困陷防空洞).

⁹ UN Security Council, “[Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Ending Ukraine Crisis, as Russian Federation Wields Veto.](#)” United Nations, New York, 25 February 2022, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/sc14808.doc.html/>.

¹⁰ *Liberation Daily (Jiefang ribao)*, February 26, 2022, small frontpage column: “Xi Jinping talks with Putin on the phone, focusing on exchanging views on the current situation in Ukraine. Supports Russia and Ukraine to solve their problems through negotiation” (习近平同普京通电话·重点就当前乌克兰局势交换意见---支持俄方同乌方通过谈判解决问题). Note that, according to David Shambaugh, “*China Goes Global. The Partial Power.*” (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), p.53, the “five principles of peaceful coexistence” (mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual nonaggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence) are “the only thing that has remained constant over time” in China’s foreign policy.

¹¹ *Foreign Ministry of China*, March 1, 2022: “Wang Yi Holds Telephone Talks with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kuleba” (王毅应约同乌克兰外长库列巴通电话). Original citation: “王毅表示, 乌克兰局势急剧变化·中方对乌俄爆发冲突感到痛惜·对平民受到伤害极为关注”.

¹² *Foreign ministry press conference*, February 28, 2022: “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Hosts Regular Press Conference on Feb. 28, 2022” (2022年2月28日外交部发言人 汪文斌主持例行记者会). Original citation: “汪文斌：中方不赞成用制裁手段解决问题”.

¹³ China’s foreign policy in the Xi Jinping era may therefore be more pro-active (some would say assertive) than it was in the Deng Xiaoping era. Now the latter’s motto for the country’s international stance (again) seems to prevail: “observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide the capabilities and bide the time; never claim leadership; make some contributions” (*lengjing guancha; wen zhu zhenjiao; chenzhe yingfu; taoguang yanghui; shan yu shou zhuo; jue bu dangtou; you suo zuowei* – 冷静观察;稳住阵脚;沉着应付;韬光养晦;善于守拙;决不当头;有所作为).

¹⁴ Initially, the word “war” was avoided. See for instance *Renmin ribao*, February 25, 2022, small column on page 3: “Foreign Ministry spokesman answers reporters’ questions on the situation in Ukraine” (外交部发言人就乌克兰局势等回答记者提问). Here the word “war” (战争) was only used pejoratively to refer to America’s alleged attempts to start one: “The U.S. is non-stop increasing tensions and fomenting war [in Ukraine]” (美方在不断推高紧张、煽动战争). This had changed by March, see for instance: *Jiefang ribao*, March 2, 2022, major column on page 7: “Russian media: a new round of negotiations held today at the Belarusian-Polish border—Ukraine formally applies to join the EU, more rapid situational evolutions, Russian troops to continue to carry out special military operations” (俄媒：今在白波边境举行新一轮谈判乌正式申请加入欧盟·局势再添变数 俄军将继续执行特别军事行动). The article’s first sentence admits to an ongoing war: “The war in Ukraine enters its sixth day” (乌克兰战事进入第六天。).

¹⁵ *Jiefang ribao*, March 2, 2022, major column on page 7: “Russian media: a new round of negotiations held today at the Belarusian-Polish border—Ukraine formally applies to join the EU, more rapid situational evolutions, Russian troops to continue to carry out special military operations” (俄媒：今在白波边境举行新一轮谈判乌正式申请加入欧盟·局势再添变数 俄军将继续执行特别军事行动). Said comments are attributed to Li Xin, director of the Eurasian Institute of the Shanghai University of Political Science and Law. Original citation: “乌克兰此时再提入盟并不出乎意外。欧盟是经济一体化组织，而非军事组织，乌克兰入盟后将合法获得更多经济支持，但又不至于踩到俄罗斯的“红线”。

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Comments by former diplomat Wang Zhen are cited to give expression to this standpoint: “The unrestricted eastward expansion of NATO is the crux of the problem, and Ukraine’s quest for NATO membership is the nucleus of this crux. The international community should seize the opportunity to promote peace talks. If [the West] would continue to provide additional weapons and equipment to one side of the conflict and continue to build momentum to pull one side into [NATO], it is tantamount to adding fuel to a fire.” (北约无限制东扩是问题的症结所在，乌克兰寻求加入北约是症结之核。国际社会应抓住时机劝和促谈。如果继续向冲突一方增援武器装备，继续造势拉一方入盟，无异于火上浇油。).