

Why China's Actions Toward Ukraine And Russia Could Shape The Course Of Future Geopolitics



John P. Ruehl

China has sought to portray itself as a neutral party in the Russia-Ukraine War. But Beijing's balancing act masks its support for the Kremlin that enables it to continue its campaign.

[Days before](#) the one-year anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2023, U.S. [officials](#) claimed that China was considering providing Russia with lethal weaponry to support its military campaign. [China denied the accusations](#), and on the anniversary of the invasion instead [put forth its 12-point peace plan](#) to end the conflict. These events followed after tensions between Beijing and Washington flared [during the Chinese spy balloon scandal](#) that began [in early February 2023](#).

Since the war's inception, the U.S. has cautioned China not to support Russia. Following reports that Russia had asked China for military assistance in March 2022, [Washington warned that countries](#) providing “material, economic, financial [or] rhetorical” support to Russia would face “consequences.” The Biden administration also [confronted China in January 2023](#) with “evidence that [suggested] some Chinese state-owned companies may be providing assistance” to the Russian military.

[China has largely adhered to Western sanctions](#) restricting business with Russia. Nonetheless, it has been essential to Russia's economic resilience and its war campaign since February 2022. China substantially increased its [coal, oil, and natural gas imports](#) from Russia in 2022, for example, which alongside India's increased imports, [have helped the Kremlin negate some of the effects](#) of declining energy sales to Europe. The underlying motive for increased Chinese and Indian purchases of Russian energy, however, remains the [steep discounts](#)

they have been offered by Russia, which is desperate to replace its former customers in Europe.

[China has also increased its technology exports to Russia](#) for use by its defense industry after many Russian companies were denied access to technology from Europe and the U.S. because of the imposition of sanctions. [According](#) to the think tank Silverado Policy Accelerator, “Russia continues to have access to crucial dual-use technologies such as semiconductors, thanks in part to China and Hong Kong.” Additionally, China has helped Russia undermine Western economic sanctions by [developing international payment systems](#) outside of Western control and has advocated for [building an “international alliance of businesses”](#) comprising non-Western companies.

Beijing has also been essential in undermining Western efforts to portray Russia as an international pariah. China has repeatedly [abstained from UN votes](#) condemning the Russian invasion and voted [against](#) an April 2022 resolution to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council. Beijing also seems to have vacillated between calling the situation in Ukraine a conflict and calling out the breaking of UN rules regarding borders. In addition, China, alongside Russia, declined to endorse the [G-20 communique](#) that featured language critical of the war in Ukraine at the end of the meeting on March 2, 2023. Chinese state media has also been [largely favorable or neutral](#) to Russia since the invasion began.

Russian and Chinese forces have [held several bilateral military exercises](#) and patrols since February 2022. The last exercise took place in the East China Sea in December 2022, and the “main purpose of the exercise [was] to strengthen naval cooperation between the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China and to maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region,” the Russian Ministry [statement](#) said. Meanwhile, both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping met and posed for photos at the September 2022 [Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#) summit. And in the coming months, Xi Jinping [is expected to travel to Russia](#) after top Chinese diplomat Wang Yi [visited Moscow in February 2023](#).

While China has shown it is willing to assist Russia, it has been careful to avoid perceptions of overt support. China has cited the need to respect and safeguard [“the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries,”](#) without denouncing Russia or calling for it to end the conflict. But after China’s top drone maker, Da

Jiang Innovations (DJI), [banned exports of its drones to Ukraine and Russia](#) in April 2022, Russia has [continued to](#) freely operate DJI surveillance technology [to target Ukrainian drone operators](#), demonstrating the limits of Chinese neutrality.

Alongside the suspected impending Chinese military supplies to Russia, that were [referred](#) to by the Biden administration, Beijing is clearly more invested in a Russian victory than a Ukrainian one, even if it won't admit it publicly.

So why is China so invested in supporting Russia while refusing to do so openly? There is no doubt a calculus in Beijing that the greater and longer the West focuses on Ukraine, the fewer resources Western countries can afford to give to Taiwan and the Asia-Pacific region. Prolonging the conflict would also weaken Russia, which in some Chinese nationalist circles is [still viewed as a competitor](#) and as having unjustly seized Chinese territory in the 19th century.

Still, there are clear benefits for China if the conflict ends sooner rather than later, and on Russian terms. Just weeks before the invasion in February 2022, Russia and China had [signed their "no limits" partnership](#), while both Xi and Putin have called the other their "[best friend](#)." Giving support to allies will help increase trust toward Beijing while also growing its leverage over a strained Russia.

China also desires a stable, friendly neighbor. A Russian defeat could lead to the country's collapse, [potentially destabilizing much of Eurasia](#). Russian leadership change, in case of a defeat, could also usher in a pro-Western Russian government on China's doorstep, something Beijing is keen to avoid.

The war has in turn [destabilized global energy and food markets](#) and caused extreme instability in the global economy, at a time when China's national economy is [still fragile as it recovers from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Russia is a vital economic partner to China, largely in the energy industry, but also owing to [the Kremlin's role in China's Belt and Road Initiative to increase trade across Eurasia](#).

While Russia's importance in this regard has diminished since the invasion, Moscow retains [significant leverage among the former Soviet countries](#) that form the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), as well as across the [energy industries of Central Asia](#).

A Ukrainian military defeat would also have negative effects on the U.S.' standing in global affairs by proving Western military assistance was unable to turn the tide of a major conflict. Contrastingly, a Ukrainian victory would solidify Western support for Taiwan, embolden Western-style democracy advocates around the world, and reverse perceptions in China of [Western decline in global affairs](#).

But an open supply of lethal weaponry could destroy China's economic relations with the West when China is still studying the effects of sanctions on a major economy like Russia. This has not prevented Beijing from pointing out the [U.S.' double standard](#) in supplying the Taiwanese military with weapons, most recently in [March 2023](#), when Foreign Minister Qin Gang [asked](#) "Why, while asking China not to provide arms to Russia, has the United States sold arms to Taiwan in violation of a [1982] joint communique?"

While relations between the U.S. and China are increasingly tense, there is fear in Beijing that overt support for Russia could damage Beijing's relations with the EU. The EU is now China's [largest export market](#), and China still [hopes to drive a wedge](#) between the EU and the U.S. and prevent the development of a joint trans-Atlantic policy toward China. Meanwhile, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on March 5, 2023, said that China [will not supply Russia with lethal military aid](#) "suggesting that Berlin has received bilateral assurances from Beijing on the issue." Together with Xi Jinping's [comments in November 2022](#) stressing the need to avoid the threat or use of nuclear weapons, China seeks to highlight [its mediating position](#) and prove it is a responsible actor in world affairs that promotes peace. The Chinese-brokered deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia to [re-establish official relations](#) on March 10, 2023, was further evidence of this initiative.

Contrastingly, [China](#) views the U.S. as a rogue superpower, and sees "[confrontation and conflict](#)" with the U.S. as inevitable unless Washington changes course, according to Qin Gang. And while China continues to be [suspicious of U.S. attempts to contain it](#), such policies have become [increasingly acknowledged](#) even in U.S. political circles in recent years.

Nonetheless, both lethal and non-lethal military aid to Russia from China will likely increase, funneled indirectly through willing third countries. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's arrival for a [state visit to Beijing](#) on February 28 caused [alarm in the U.S. precisely because of this reason](#). Ultimately, China

sees the Ukraine war as part of a wider conflict with the U.S.-led Western world. Aiding Russia is seen as a strategic decision for China, meaning its “[pro-Russian neutrality](#)” will continue to be cautiously tested in Beijing.

While China did not cause the Ukraine crisis, it seeks to navigate it effectively. The [Sino-Soviet split](#) in the early 1960s allowed Beijing to rapidly expand its ties with the West, and the Ukraine crisis will help China benefit from its relationship with Russia amid global economic uncertainty. China will take the necessary steps to avoid spooking the EU, while recognizing that tension with Washington may be inescapable.

Author Bio:

This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

John P. Ruehl is an Australian-American journalist living in Washington, D.C. He is a contributing editor to Strategic Policy and a contributor to several other foreign affairs publications. His book, [Budget Superpower: How Russia Challenges the West With an Economy Smaller Than Texas](#), was published in December 2022.

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