

No End in Sight? The West, China, and the Russo-Ukrainian War

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The West supports Ukraine as a non-belligerent. China purports to be neutral, but the West increasingly sees it as a non-belligerent on the side of Russia. In a way, the West's and China's approaches are not dissimilar: doing enough for "their" side to stop it from losing the war, but otherwise sitting it out in the hope that the other side will somehow give up. That can hardly be called a strategy. Both the West and China will have to review their strategies if they want to preserve their interests. Will this inevitably increase tensions between them?

THE DITHERING WEST

It is shameful that more than two years into the war, the West has still not moved beyond piecemeal decision-making about its support for Ukraine. The pattern keeps repeating itself. Every few months, a new weapons system is being considered for transfer to Ukraine. Governments dither for weeks or more, before in the end refraining from delivering the weapons. Or, if they do decide to release them, then in such small quantities that they have no decisive impact. The current debate about long-range missiles is the latest iteration. Meanwhile, the continued supply of replacements and ammunition for previously allocated weapons systems is far from assured. On the contrary, Ukraine can still not count on a regular supply of war matériel.

It is not that the West has been intimidated by Russia's threat of retaliation, not even by the recent announcement of a change in nuclear doctrine (which would allow first use against a non-nuclear state that is supported by a nuclear

power). If it had, the West would not have supported Ukraine at all, and the country would no longer exist as an independent state. It is necessary, though, to manage the risk of escalation in any war that directly involves a great power as a combatant. That is why in the Korean War (1950-1953), China's territory was off limits, even though unlike today in Ukraine, American, European (including Belgian) and other UN troops were directly fighting Chinese troops in North Korea.

If one's own strategy is not clear, however, that calculus is impossible to make. Take the long-range missiles: Do Western political and military leaders expect them to have a decisive effect on the war? Are they able and willing to supply sufficient numbers to that end in the first place? If not, then it hardly seems worth incurring any risk. But if yes, that changes the calculus. The West thus needs to reassess its overall strategy before it can reasonably decide on such a deployment. Now is the time, as President Zelensky is proposing his "Victory Plan".

Fundamentally, the question is: Do Western leaders still believe what they say? That Ukraine can win the war, i.e. liberate all of its territory? If they do, they must finally provide Ukraine with the arms to do so. But if they do not, they must decide on an achievable alternative objective – the least bad alternative. That would not necessarily mean, of course, to push Ukraine to ask for negotiations right away. It could also mean preparing a major offensive to liberate part of its territory, in order to put it in a better position for negotiations. The West can definitely not carry on the way it is now, however: pretending to believe in victory while giving Ukraine only just enough (or just not enough) to hold the front where it is now.

STRONGISH EUROPE

Nevertheless, the West's, and certainly the EU's tenacity in continuing to provide support for Ukraine, insufficient though it may be, has surprised many, notably China. In a way, China's position in the context of the war is weaker, and Europe's stronger, than one might assume.

China pretends to doubt that the EU can maintain its military and financial support for Ukraine. But that is wishful thinking. *"Would things not be a lot less complicated if the EU just convinced Ukraine to accept its losses and end the war?"* The reality is that the EU will not abandon its new candidate for membership, in spite of the cost. (Note, by the way, that nobody in China seems to expect the war to end through a Russian military victory). Actually, Beijing worries about Europeans yet deploying ground troops, as President Macron has hinted, and about the increased risk of escalation that this, or the delivery of certain weapons systems, would entail. Hence the constant warning that Western weapons deliveries are prolonging the war.

What this ignores, of course, is that Russia, by staying on the offensive, forces Ukraine to continue to fight in order not to lose even more territory. The very first precondition for hypothetical negotiations is that Russia stops attacking and goes on the defensive. China also avoids the question of whether Putin would be willing to accept anything less than the four Ukrainian oblasts that he claims but has not actually fully conquered. Whereas it is unimaginable that Ukraine voluntarily relinquishes as yet unoccupied territory. Again: wishful thinking.

It is painfully true, however, that the EU is not ready (though it should have been) to compensate for any reduction of American military support to Ukraine. Even if Harris wins the US elections, her government will likely expect Europeans to gradually assume most of that burden. Trump on the other hand might cut support from one day to the next, and go even further and attempt to force Ukraine to concede.

IS BEIJING PEAKING?

The latter scenario actually creates some cause for worry in China. If, hypothetically, Trump and Putin make a deal, and lay the ground for further cooperation, that leaves China isolated. Indeed, while Western leaders criticise China for supporting Russia far more than its purported neutral stance ought to allow, Russian scholars criticise China for not doing enough. Russia most likely resents China's ruthless exploitation of Russia's weakness, now that it is to a large extent cut off from the Western economies, to exact major economic concessions. Alternatively, if India would manage to position itself as a successful mediator in the war, China would be left out as well.

Meanwhile, China's gains from this war likely have peaked. It may not be able to extract many more concessions from Russia without creating a backlash. Its purported neutral stance (which is real only in the sense, and as long as, China does not provide direct military support) has gained it support in the Global South, but the focus has since shifted to the war in Gaza. Meanwhile, North Korea's military support for Russia has allowed it to gain some freedom of action vis-à-vis Beijing and, likely, technological support from Moscow, which may threaten the fragile stability of the Korean peninsula. Iran is another country where growing Russian influence probably detracts from China's leading role. The war has not distracted the US from its rivalry with China. Quite the opposite, in fact: it has given the hawks even more ground to confront China. Only Europe really pays a high price, but because China has increasingly come to be seen as part of the problem, that has not resulted in any willingness to go softer on China and seek economic benefits there.

China has arrived at a crossroads. It can consolidate its gains, and prevent any (further) losses, either by working actively for an early end to the war – or by moving closer to Russia and providing it with more support more openly.



CONCLUSION: FROM HOT WAR TO COLD WAR?

Many in the West feel that China is already set on the latter course. Organising a Chinese-Belarusian military exercise close to the Polish border during the NATO Summit last July, supposedly in reaction to European military deployments in the South China Sea, is seen as a direct expression of support for Russia's war. How could Europeans see it otherwise? Announcing a new intercontinental ballistic missile that could reach New York in twenty minutes while leaders gather at the UN General Assembly also hardly conveys a peaceful message. And recent reports about Russia producing drones in China put in doubt China's assertion that it does not deliver arms to Russia. Compared to China's rhetoric, the image that increasingly emerges is one of either incoherence, or wilful deception.

Chinese scholars, at least, are fully aware of the damage that is being done to China's reputation in the West, and of how China's stance on the war overshadows all other discussions. At the same time, many in the West overestimate China's margin of manoeuvre towards Russia. China probably is not entirely dissatisfied that Russia got a bloody nose in Ukraine: Beijing appreciates Russian support, but not Russian adventurism. China wants to maintain freedom of action: it will never let Russia determine its strategy. But the Chinese vital interest (notably counterbalancing the US at the global level as well as maintaining a regional balance of power with Russia) means that China not only will not, but in fact cannot abandon Russia either. Yet, if China steers ever closer to Russia, it risks provoking the EU and the US into ever further "de-risking", until it turns into "de-coupling". And the more China disconnects from the West, the more it will have to take into account the Russian position.

There are important voices in China and in the West that want to prevent this negative spiral. The precondition is sufficient mutual understanding in order not to expect the impossible. The EU will not allow Russia to win a total victory in Ukraine. It has no choice but to halt Russian expansionism there, for if it does not, Russia will surely target more countries, such as Moldova and Georgia –

also candidates for EU membership. Such an overbearing Russia would surely not serve China's interests either. China will not turn against Russia and adopt sanctions. But, as a first step, could Beijing not act on its own rhetoric, and call once more for reticence in the nuclear domain?

Americans feel they are in a cold war with China already; most Europeans see themselves in a cold war with Russia. It is not yet inevitable that the hot war in Ukraine turns into a new global cold war, pitting the EU and the US against Russia and China, but the risk is increasing. The only way to avoid it is if China plays a constructive role, alongside the EU and the US, in the eventual settlement of the war between Ukraine and Russia. That also depends, of course, on how things evolve on the battlefield. And on Trump not getting there first.

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