

Calculation and Risks in China's Dealings with the Russia-Ukraine War

Che-chuan Lee
Associate Research Fellow

Division of National Security Research

Topic: International Situation

1. News Highlights

On April 7, 2022, the United Nations General Assembly voted to suspend Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council; of the 193 member states, 93 voted in favor, 24 voted against (including Russia, China, Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Syria, and Vietnam), and 58 abstained. Calling the move “illegitimate and politically motivated,” Russia announced its complete withdrawal from the Council. Zhang Jun, China’s representative to the UN, warned before the vote that he would vote against it, saying that “such a hasty move by the UN General Assembly

to force countries to choose sides will exacerbate differences among member states and intensify confrontation between the parties concerned.¹ China’s attitude seems to have changed significantly in the face of Russia’s unfavorable progress in the Ukraine conflict and increased pressure from the US and Europe for Beijing not to assist Moscow. In this article, we will observe the twists and turns in China’s official statements in international organizations and explore the possible calculations and risks of China’s response to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

1. “The UN General Assembly Voted to Suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council, How do Others See?,” *Central News Agency*, April 8, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/e6joax>; “UN General Assembly Suspends Russia’s Membership in Human Rights Council, China: Fueling the Fire,” *Reuters*, April 8, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/02Yee6>; UN News Twitter, April 7, 2022, <https://is.gd/u4xVOi>.

2. Security Implications

On February 4, 2022, before the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympics, Xi Jinping visited Russian President Vladimir Putin and signed the "Sino-Russian Joint Declaration on International Relations and Sustainable Global Development in the New Age" and 15 agreements on topics including oil and gas deals, declaring that the relationship between China and Russia "transcends the military-political alliance in the Cold War era" and "the friendship between the two countries knows no ends and cooperation knows no bounds". A few days after the Winter Olympics, Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine.

2-1. Beijing did not condemn Russia and takes a non-intervening, non-interfering position on the conflict

On February 24, Russia invaded Ukraine; and on the following day, Zheng Yongnian, Director of the Institute of Advanced Studies in Global and Contemporary China of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Shenzhen), who is regarded as an important official brain trust of China, published an article titled "War in Ukraine and the Reconstruction of World Order?", and

pointed out that the war in Ukraine would "significantly slow down the shift of the US efforts from Europe to the Indo-Pacific region" and that as long as China "does not make subversive strategic mistakes," China's modernization process not only won't be interrupted but also "will have the ability and will to play an important role in the process of building a new international order."

After the war began, Beijing tried to pacify both Russia and Ukraine at the same time, urging calm and calling for peace while emphasizing its "non-intervention and non-interference" position. Although China claims to recognize Ukraine's territorial sovereignty, it has not condemned Moscow for interfering in the internal affairs of other countries but rather declared that Russia's security demands should be taken seriously and properly resolved as the Chinese official media has mostly used the Russian term "Special Military Operation" to describe the war. According to the New York Times, the policy circles in China believe that China will be the winner in this turbulent situation since its strategy would avoid possible diplomatic and economic consequences. As long as China can transcend the struggle between

the US and Russia, the country will benefit from the post-war geopolitical changes and the world will see China as a pillar of stability.²

2-2. Beijing verbally declares willingness to mediate to end the war, but no action is taken

On March 7, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said at a press conference at the National People's Congress that China is "willing to work with the international community to provide necessary mediation when needed" regarding the conflict and will provide urgent humanitarian supplies to Ukraine. The following day, during a virtual summit with French President Macron and German Chancellor Scholz, Xi Jinping said he "deeply deplored the raging war on the European continent" and said China was willing

to "play a positive role together with the international community according to the needs of the parties involved."³

In addition, Ukraine and Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, have also called on China to mediate.

Although China has called for peace, it has not mediated or facilitated the negotiations while France and Turkey have stepped in to make relevant efforts. On March 15, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian even said at a press conference that the call by Ukraine to discuss the war at this year's Group of Twenty (G20) ministerial meeting was inappropriate. Since the G20 is a major forum for international economic cooperation, it's not a suitable venue for discussing political security issues such as Ukraine's.⁴ These seemingly contradictory positions and statements by the Beijing

2. Steven Lee Myers and Chris Buckley, "China Sees at Least One Winner Emerging from Ukraine War: China," *New York Times*, March 14, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/X4on3j>; Liu Youming, "Why Does Beijing Continue to Cooperate with Putin Even Though It May Not Have a Chance to Make a Profit from the War between Russia and Ukraine?," *The News Lens*, March 29, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/nEWkOe>.

3. "State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Answers Questions from Chinese and Foreign Journalists on China's Foreign Policy and Foreign Relations," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, March 7, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/X4vn57>; "Xi Jinping Holds Video Summit with French and German Leaders," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, <https://reurl.cc/MbnqE4>.

4. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Hosted a Regular Press Conference on March 15, 2022," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, March 15, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/k7GDQ9>.

authorities may be a short-term resolution to its own assessment that the military operation could end quickly; but as the war continued and other countries stepped up sanctions against Russia, China abandoned its “neutrality” in favor of more explicit position to support Russia and criticize the US.

3. Trend Observation

Since Russia's military actions did not defeat Ukraine quickly as expected, the US and European countries have increased their actions to aid Kyiv and sanction Moscow. Although Beijing has publicly stated its opposition to sanctions against Russia, China would have to bear the risk of losing the US and European markets as well as its participation in global technology and financial transactions to US and European sanctions if it keeps supporting the relatively small Russian market; and there is no sign of

China's RMB Cross-border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) helping after seven major Russian banks were removed from SWIFT.⁵ In other words, Beijing's “rational calculation” is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve.

3-1. Chinese position is shifting from “benefit from two sides” to “support Russia against US”

In the face of the changing situation, Hu Wei, Deputy Director of the Public Policy Research Center of the State Council of China, wrote on March 12 that “apparent neutrality is a wise choice, but it does not apply to this war,” and he suggested that “China cannot be tied to Russian President Vladimir Putin” and needs to cut ties as soon as possible, otherwise China will be further isolated by the US and Western siege. Zhu Feng, a professor in the Department of Diplomacy and International Affairs at Nanjing University's School of International

5. In 2021, the Sino-Russian trade volume was US\$146.8 billion, much lower than which between China and the US (US\$657 billion) or Europe (US\$828 billion). The transaction volume of China's self-developed RMB Cross-border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) is also far less than that of SWIFT. In the third quarter of 2021, the transaction volumes of the two were about 13,000 and 40 million transactions per day respectively. “Chinese Banks Can't Save Putin: 80% of China's Payment Transactions Rely on SWIFT,” *Liberty Times*, March 6, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/qOMyyn>.

Relations, also expressed “great, great anxiety” that the Russia-Ukraine war would force Europe to tilt toward the US and drag China deeper into trouble; and the US allies in the Pacific “would adopt a tougher military posture... everything seems unfriendly to China.”

Sun Yun, Director of the Stimson Center's China program, also said that in the long run, Russia will become an orphan in the international community and will have no other country to turn to except China. If China gets too close to Russia, its tensions with Europe or other regions could be deepened; if Germany, France, and other US allies strengthen their own defenses against Russia, the US will eventually be able to free up more military resources to confront China.⁶ Hu Wei's article was soon completely deleted from the Internet, while Zhu Feng and Sun Yun's concerns about the risks involved may not have been taken into account by the CCP central, since Beijing is quickly shifting its “neutral” posture to a more explicitly pro-Russia, anti-US strategy.

3-2. China has explicitly supported Russia in the international community since mid-March

As of April 7, eight votes on the Russian-Ukrainian war have been taken by the relevant UN organizations, and Beijing's stance on these issues has been clearly changed since mid-March. From the day after the outbreak of the war between Russia and Ukraine to March 4, there were four proposals presented: condemnation of Russia, whether to convene an emergency special session of the General Assembly to discuss the matter, to demand Russia immediately stop its attacks and withdraw its troops, and whether to establish an international commission of inquiry to investigate all human rights violations and breaches of international law during the war in Ukraine; but China did not vote for or against them but abstained from voting.

On March 16, the International Court of Justice ruled that Russia should immediately cease its military actions against Ukraine; of the 15 judges, only

6. “Scholar in China's System Proposes to Cut Ties with Putin, but Censored from the Internet,” *Radio Free Asia*, March 14, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/9OgMmj>; Steven Lee Myers and Chris Buckley, “China Sees at Least One Winner Emerging from Ukraine War: China,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/X4on3j>.

Kirill Gevorgian, the Russian Vice-President of the Court, and Xue Hanqin, the Chinese judge, expressed their opposition, making it the first time that China stood with Russia in an UN-related vote. On March 23 and March 24, faced with two proposals for humanitarian aid to Ukraine, China was the only country that chose to support the Russian version of the proposal and abstained from the versions proposed by other countries. On April 7, before the UN General Assembly voted on whether to suspend Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council, China's permanent representative to the UN, Zhang Jun, announced that he would vote against the suspension, saying that China "firmly opposes the politicization and instrumentalization of human rights issues, and also opposes selectivity, double standards, and confrontation on human rights issues. China also stands against the use of human rights issues to exert pressure on other countries".⁷

3-3. Chinese officials and media criticize the US synchronously

In a speech at an online forum at Tsinghua University in Beijing on March 19, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng criticized the West's sanctions against Russia for invading Ukraine as "increasingly outrageous. ...and the abusive sanctions will bring disastrous consequences to the entire world". He also criticized, not to the US by name, that "bucking the trend and engaging in some 'Indo-Pacific strategy' to cause trouble everywhere... bringing the region to the evil path of fragmentation and camping. Such an 'Indo-Pacific strategy' is as dangerous as Europe's NATO expansion to the east, and if left unchecked, the consequences will be unimaginable, ultimately pushing the Asia-Pacific region into the fire."⁸

From March 29 to April 11, People's Daily published a series of 10

7. "UN General Assembly Votes to Suspend Russia's Membership in Human Rights Council," *UN News*, April 7, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/DdWapQ>.

8. "Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng Attends the Fourth International Forum on Strategy and Security and Delivers a Speech," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, March 19, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/dXK6Ly>.

commentary articles titled “US Hegemony in the Light of the Ukraine Crisis” under the byline “Zhong Sheng”, while Xinhua Online published six similar consecutive articles between April 7-12. The commentary series in the two official media severely accused the US of being behind the war in Ukraine and the source of the international disorder.⁹ On March 31, at a press conference after hosting the third meeting of foreign ministers of Afghanistan’s neighbors in Tunxi, Anhui Province, Wang Yi put forward China’s “five insistences” on the crisis in Ukraine, with a tit-for-tat rebuke of US actions.¹⁰ On April 1, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian also followed up in a regular press conference by criticizing the US as the originator and biggest driver of the Ukraine crisis.

With the possible long-term development of the Russian-Ukrainian war, China and Russia are embracing each other more and more tightly, and the Russian and Ukrainian camps are investing more and more resources. Whether a compromise can be found in the confrontation between China and the US or whether it continues to intensify, and whether a “decent” settlement can be reached in this war, will put the wisdom of the major powers to the test, and will also affect the post-war global geostrategy as well as the political and economic landscape.

9. “Extra! People’s Daily Published Zhong Sheng’s Ten Comments on US Hegemony,” *People’s Daily Overseas Network*, April 11, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/Dy1vge>; “The US ‘Black Hand’ Behind the Chaos in Ukraine is Revealed in Six Consecutive Xinhua News Agency Articles,” *Xinhuanet*, April 13, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/b26k2o>.

10. “Wang Yi on China’s Five Insistences on Ukraine,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, April 1, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/g0LV5p>.

Table: UN votes related to Russia-Ukraine war and China's position

Time	Organization and title	Voting results and China's position
February 25	Security Council: Whether to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine	Vetoed. For: 11 countries; Abstain: China, India, UAE; Against: Russia.
February 27	Security Council: whether to convene an emergency special session of the General Assembly on the situation in Ukraine.	Passed. For: 11 countries; Abstaining: China, India, UAE; Against: Russia.
March 2	General Assembly: Russia should immediately stop attacking Ukraine and fully withdraw its troops.	Passed. For: 141 countries; Abstain: China, India, and 35 other countries. Against: Russia, Belarus, North Korea, Syria, Eritrea.
March 4	Human Rights Council: Whether to establish an "independent international commission of inquiry" to investigate all human rights violations and breaches of international law during the war in Ukraine.	Passed. For: 32 countries; Abstain: China, India, and 13 other countries; Against: Russia, Eritrea.
March 16	International Court of Justice: Russia should immediately stop its military operations against Ukraine.	The ruling passed. For: 15 votes; Against: Russian and Chinese judges with 2 votes.
March 23	Security Council: Vote on "Humanitarian Situation in Ukraine" Submitted by Russia, Belarus, North Korea, and Syria. ¹¹	Not passed. For: China, Russia; Against: None; Abstain: 13.
March 24	General Assembly: passed a resolution on humanitarian aid in Ukraine, condemning Russia for causing a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and demanding an immediate ceasefire to protect Ukrainian civilians and their homes, schools, and hospitals.	Passed. For: 140; Against: 5 (Russia, Belarus, Syria, North Korea, and Eritrea); Abstentions: China and 38 others.
April 7	General Assembly: Suspension of Russia's membership in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for "serious and systematic" human rights violations and abuses during the Russian invasion of Ukraine.	Passed. For: 93 votes; Against: China and other 24 votes; Abstain: 58 votes.

Source: Compiled by Che-chuan Lee based on public information.

11. "Russia is too reckless to propose a resolution calling on the international community to address a humanitarian crisis of its own making," said Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the US Permanent Representative to the United Nations. "It is clear that Russia does not care about the deteriorating humanitarian situation or the war that shattered the lives and dreams of millions". See "Security Council Fails to Adopt a Draft Resolution on the Humanitarian Situation in Ukraine," *UN News*, March 23, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/RjadaD>.

Table 2: China’s “Five Insistences” on the Ukraine Crisis

Titles	Contents
Insist on the right direction to pursue peace and facilitate negotiation	The only way out is dialogue and negotiation. China opposes fueling the fire and aggravating the confrontation. China calls for a ceasefire to stop the war and supports Russia and Ukraine to start direct dialogues.
Insist on defending the basic principles of international relations	China respects the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, and opposes pushing smaller countries to the front line of geopolitical games.
Insist on preventing the return of the Cold War mentality	China does not agree with the “friends or foe” confrontation and is determined to promote international solidarity and advocate a common, cooperative, integrated, and sustainable security concept. China respects and takes care of the legitimate, reasonable concerns of all parties.
Insist on protecting the legitimate rights of all countries	China opposes unilateral sanctions that have no basis in international law and calls for safeguarding the international industrial supply chain to avoid damaging the normal economic and trade exchanges between countries and people’s lives.
Insist on upholding peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region	China is determined to pursue a sincere, tolerant diplomatic policy and guard against the introduction of the US group confrontation scourge in the region through its “Indo-Pacific strategy”. China wishes to accelerate the promotion of regional integration and cooperation to protect the hard-won development momentum in the region.

Source: “Wang Yi on China’s Five Insistences on Ukraine,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, April 1, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/g0LV5p>.

(Originally published in the 52th “National Defense and Security Biweekly”, April 22 , 2022, by the Institute for National Defense and Security Research.)

(The contents and advice in the assessments are the personal opinions of the authors, and do not represent the position of the Institute for National Defense and Security Research)