British Journal of Chinese Studies, Vol. 13.1, January 2023
ISSN 2048-0601

China's Ukraine Policy: The Challenge of Analysis

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Abstract

China's Ukraine policy is often blurred and ambiguous, and fails to provide answers to some important questions. However there are signs of growing disquiet over Russia's invasion, and China can be said to be neutral in the strict legal sense. Those in the modern China field will find their expertise an advantage, and may have the opportunity to put questions to Chinese colleagues and friends.

Key words: UN Charter, Ukraine, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, sovereignty, intermediate zone, immediate ceasefire, humanitarian aid, neutrality

Anyone working in the China field at the present time, whatever their particular focus, is likely to feel a special obligation to try to understand China's policy on Ukraine, not least because others will expect them to be able to explain it. Yet to do so is more than usually challenging: the evidence is sparse and ambiguous and is generally presented, whether by Beijing or its critics, in unhelpfully binary terms. On some key questions, such as whether or not Russia has violated the UN Charter, there is no explicitly stated Chinese position. There is very little academic discourse by Chinese commentators even of the limited type possible on an issue such as Taiwan, while nearly all comments in China's social media — including those from wolf-warrior diplomats — are crudely pro-Russian, as are those in the quasi-official media such as *Global Times*. We should also acknowledge that 'Western' analysis, both political and in the media, is often driven by a broader hostility to China partly grounded in legitimate concern over issues such as Xinjiang and Hong Kong, but often reflecting a more sweeping assumption, with cold war echoes, that China is now the enemy.

In the following brief study completed in late October 2022, I shall try to identify both what can be learnt and what remains unclear — probably to most Chinese as well as to us. However, many of us in the China field may be better able to bring an understanding of historical background and context to throw light on these uncertainties. The starting point has to be the new relationship which is claimed to exist between China and Russia, and which stems from the meeting on 4th February 2022 of Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin at the start of the Beijing Winter Olympics. As described in their lengthy joint statement, the relationship has "no limits" and is "superior to the political and military alliances of the cold war era" (*President of Russia*, 2022). Since then Chinese media and politicians have failed to elaborate on these formulae, or to locate them in a broader strategic framework. It is said that the new relationship is based on "the clear logic of history" (*Global Times*, 2022b), yet alignment with Moscow may raise uneasy echoes from Sino-Soviet tensions of the past, while

the great-power play which it implies may jar with China's regularly stated wish (*Global Times*, 2022d) for a multilateral world. Beijing's silence is in marked contrast with, for example, the serious discussion of Chinese foreign policy that accompanied entry to the WTO and relations with the US, which I have explored elsewhere (Gittings, 2006: 290-98). Yet Beijing remains likely to follow the basic approach to foreign policy established long ago by Mao Zedong, in which the relative weight of contradictions on the world scene is calculated, and those 'intermediate' forces that may be won over are identified. With scant evidence, such as a rare suggestion that Central Europe could constitute a "new intermediate zone" (Kang Jie, 2022), or even that those countries including China that are neutral towards the Ukraine war may constitute such a zone (*China Daily*, 2022), we should still try to reconstruct this putative world view.

The second area to consider is the actual extent of Chinese support for Russia in its invasion of Ukraine. Here too we have to steer between over-statements from opposite sides — that China is unequivocally in "alignment" with Russia, as US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken asserts (*Reuters*, 2022c) — or the claim that China is maintaining a "neutral stance" (*Global Times*, 2022a), although this claim is rarely made by Beijing so directly. With little to go on, we are driven to the sort of analytical technique more common in the past, particularly during the Cultural Revolution when direct contact with the mainland was so limited, of studying the wording of successive statements to identify meaningful shifts in Chinese phraseology — tedious work but still capable of yielding results.

China's abstention in the early crucial UN resolutions (Security Council, 26 February, General Assembly 2 March) created a strong impression that Beijing was *au fond* on Russia's side, yet it was not unexpected. China had previously abstained on resolutions addressing Russia's occupation of Crimea, and in April 2021 it had quietly informed Ukraine (*Ukrinform*, 2021) that it did not recognise Russian sovereignty there. Nor was China alone in abstaining, although the extent of the Assembly vote (*UN News*, 2022) condemning Russia — 73 percent of the UN membership — went well beyond what would be expected from the pro-Western 'usual suspects'.

We should also note that abstention from a resolution does not by its nature indicate opposition to it, thus Beijing has not actually dissented from the majority UN view of Russian aggression. However, while asserting its support for the principle of 'sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries' — which implies criticism of the Russian invasion, as in the unvarying formula (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 2022a), employed by Chinese UN ambassador Zhang Jun — China has done so without actually mentioning the integrity of Ukraine, although a later statement by Zhang Jun (*Xinhua,* 2022b) came closer to doing so. Nor does it openly report Russian claims to sovereignty over parts of Ukraine which, if acknowledged, would undermine Beijing's insistence that there is no comparison with the case of Taiwan. When China abstained in the October 2022 General Assembly vote on Russia's annexation of four Ukraine territories, it again avoided specific reference to the Russian action (*UN China Mission*, 2022). And while asserting its unwavering support for the UN Charter, China has never addressed the logical consequence that Russia's

invasion must be a violation of that Charter. The reason against this — which is only implied by Zhang Jun — is that 'the legitimate security concerns of all countries should be taken seriously [i.e. including Russia's concerns over NATO expansion]'. Yet however valid such concerns might be, they cannot, under the Charter, in any way justify the invasion. This whole area appears to be an embarrassment to Beijing, which is why there has been no comment on it except early on from a few brave critics (*New York Times*, 2022) who were quickly silenced.

If China were to express its concerns more openly, this could have had — and might still have — a profound effect upon President Putin, and we should regret that it has not yet done so. Indeed, by refusing to call the war a 'war', let alone an 'invasion', and by allowing senior officials and the media to re-cycle Russian conspiracy theories (e.g. that the Bucha massacre was staged by Ukraine), Beijing has created an impression of support for Putin which is less solid in reality. Yet President Xi insisted three weeks into the war that the invasion was "not something we want to see", and that "countries should not come to the point of meeting on the battlefield" (*Xinhua*, 2022a). China's US ambassador Qin Gang also asserted that the claim that China had prior knowledge of the invasion "was purely disinformation" (*Washington Post*, 2022). These disclaimers have received little attention – though of course we may question their sincerity.

The fact remains that China does conform to the narrow obligations of the law concluded at the 1907 Hague Peace Conference, which only requires neutrality in military terms (Frei, 1986: 29). In the broader view of neutrality widely adopted in recent decades, China is behaving, politically at least, in a less than neutral way. Nevertheless, President Zelensky of Ukraine has said that he believed that "as for now, China is balancing and indeed has neutrality" and that this is better than if China should "join Russia" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2022).

Finally, we should seek to clarify China's claim to be working for a peaceful settlement of the war, while it maintains that it is doing so "in its own way" (*Reuters*, 2022b), although the "way" is never specified. Here too there is evidence of uncertainty and ambiguity. China has called for an immediate ceasefire (The Aspen Institute, 2022), a demand implicitly directed at Russia, but only a few times (*Reuters*, 2022a) and not loudly. This is in contrast to countries including India, Indonesia, Hungary, Turkey and others who, unlike China, have publicised their approaches to President Putin and their appeals for peace. China's declared concern for the "humanitarian crisis" in Ukraine (*Global Times*, 2022c) has only been backed (at the time of writing) by two relatively small consignments of aid delivered early on.

If Beijing is seeking to restrain Russia from continuing the war, this can only be inferred with caution from close analysis of the published exchanges between Russian and Chinese leaders. These do indeed appear to show the growth of a more critical attitude on Beijing's part. There was a significant difference of emphasis between the Russian and Chinese read-outs of the messages exchanged on 16 June (Xi's birthday, although this was not mentioned!) between Putin and Xi (Cowhig, 2022). The Kremlin's version claimed that Xi had "noted the legitimacy of Russia's actions…", but in the Chinese account Xi was said to have

emphasised that "China has always independently assessed the situation…" China's language also became more circumspect in a series of exchanges during July-August between the foreign ministers of both countries, as when Wang Yi told Lavrov that China would "continue to hold an objective and impartial position, focus on promoting peace talks, and support all efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of the crisis" (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 2022b).

When Putin and Xi took part in the September 2022 meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Samarkand, the Russian leader acknowledged "the balanced position of our Chinese friends in connection with the Ukrainian crisis", adding that "we understand your questions and concern about this". Xi in his statement did not refer to Ukraine by name, but said that China was "willing to work with Russia to play a leading role in demonstrating the responsibility of major powers…" (*Aljazeera*, 2022). How to interpret these statements is a matter of debate, but they do seem to indicate a further distancing by Beijing. However, if China was urging restraint in private, it can have had no effect upon Putin who soon proceeded to intensify Russia's aggression.

The picture outlined above is blurred and ambiguous — a long way from the rival certainties often claimed — and it leaves a lot of ground to be explored. Many who are working in the field of modern China will be able to use their expertise to probe more deeply; some will also have the opportunity to raise these questions with Chinese colleagues and friends. We should not hesitate to seek greater clarity simply because Beijing wishes to avoid providing it.

Update: By the end of November 2022, Chinese disquiet over the Ukraine war was becoming clearer, though mostly expressed indirectly. It seemed likely that Beijing had drawn a red line at least over the threat or use of nuclear weapons by Putin. Following the concern acknowledged by Putin at the Samarkand summit, the Chinese media began to urge more openly a diplomatic solution to the war. When German Chancellor Scholz visited Beijing in November, Xi called on the international community to reject the threat of nuclear weapons. Later, at the G20 summit in Bali, Xi was said to have agreed with President Biden that the use of such weapons in Ukraine was unacceptable, although the Chinese media did not report this. However, China continued to avoid any explicit expression of support for Ukraine, and there were no further consignments of humanitarian aid.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Harriet Evans for her helpful comments.

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