

China and Ukraine

An ambiguous diplomacy

John Gittings

For many years, John Gittings was a distinguished journalist on The Guardian newspaper. He is now a foremost peace historian. His landmark book, The Glorious Art of Peace, should be in every peace activist's library (Oxford, £12.99).

Three weeks before President Putin invaded Ukraine, he arrived in Beijing to attend the winter Olympics and promptly issued a joint statement with Xi Jinping that glowed with friendship. Both sides agreed to set up a “new kind of relationship” that was “superior” to their Cold War alliance, and in which there were “no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation”. As usual, the Chinese government and media offered no elaboration on the meaning of this: outside China it was widely interpreted to mean that Putin had promised to take no action on Ukraine till the winter Olympics were over, and that Xi had agreed not to object to whatever action he might take.

Under Xi Jinping, Chinese policy statements are even more rigid and formulaic than before, and the old skills of Beijingology have come back into tiresome play. So when, two weeks (7 March) after the Russian invasion, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said he wished to stress “the China-Russia relationship is... based on non-alliance, non-confrontation and non-targeting of any third party”, the words were clearly significant – but in what way? Was this simply an elaboration of the “new kind of relationship”, or was it an effort to distance China from an invasion that even at this early date was not going well? If so, was this distancing genuine or just designed to create the illusion of neutrality?

Several months further on, it remains hard to decide exactly where China stands on the biggest challenge for sixty years to the future peace of the world. Our judgement is complicated by uncertainty as to the power balance in Beijing. Did Xi promise too much to Putin and is now on

the defensive against internal critics, or does he remain firmly in control but hampered by his commitment and uncertain how to act?

My own view – and no one has the facts to offer much more – is that it was in the interests of both Putin and Xi to avoid specifics in discussing Ukraine. While Putin would not want to alarm China in advance of his intended action, Xi would not want to be compromised by learning too much. Xi may have calculated initially that a successful and swift Russian invasion would put the US and its allies on the defensive, clearing the path for the Chinese invasion of Taiwan. If so, that calculation has now been proved faulty.

China's world view

It would be wrong to see China's position only through one aspect of a much larger picture for Beijing. Central to this is China's mistrust of US policies in its own region, so that NATO's expansion into the former Soviet bloc is viewed very much through an East Asian lens. China's rise to great power status was encouraged by the US in the 1990s; entry into the WTO (achieved in 2001) was seen by both as paving the way for cooperation rather than conflict. The two countries, said President Jiang Zemin in 1997, shared "broad common interests and shoulder common responsibility on many important questions", a view reciprocated by President Clinton when he visited Beijing. The US mood began to change with the arrival of George W Bush: China was viewed increasingly as a global rival while Chinese negative views of the US, still recalling American support for Chiang Kai-shek, began to resurface. The decline of trust on both sides since then is a complex story, but at heart is American fear of a strong China – which it had helped to build up – and Chinese mistrust, which can be taken to extremes, of what is perceived as America's ambition to deny it its rightful place in the world.

Chinese strategists have long been accustomed to judge specific challenges on the basis of a broad view of the dominant world contradictions – an approach that goes back to Mao Zedong's strategies even before the 1949 victory. In its crudest form it amounts to this: who is China's enemy, who is China's friend, and how can those countries lying in between, in the "intermediate" zone, be won over? From this perspective the US is the foe and Russia, for all its failings, the friend, while Europe is one of the principal "intermediate" zones. The picture is not so clear as in the past: some Chinese analysts see the EU as a third power centre while Eastern and Southern Europe are a "middle zone" in contention. Negative views of the US are only reinforced by the reciprocal hostility of Washington towards China. Thus although the US might be

expected to seek better relations with Beijing today to offset Russian influence, instead Secretary of State Anthony Blinken declares that in spite of the invasion of Ukraine, “China remains the greatest challenger of the US and its allies” (*New York Times*, 26 May 2022). Such statements allow China to claim the high ground, asserting in response that “it is never China’s goal to surpass or replace the US”. This moderate diplomatic tone is not reflected in the Chinese media, nor indeed in social media postings from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that routinely denounce, mock and vilify the US.

China’s Ukraine policy

Chinese policy has been spelt out along the following lines:

1. China supports the principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty (understood to include Ukraine). It also firmly supports the UN Charter. However, China believes that security of one nation must not be achieved at the expense of the security of all (a coded reference to NATO expansion).
2. China is “deeply worried and saddened” by the war (Premier Li Keqiang, 11 March) and wishes to see peace restored as soon as possible. This should be achieved through negotiation, and China is working to bring this about – but it is doing so “in its own way” (the same phrase is used invariably but without elaboration).
3. China deplores the humanitarian disaster now occurring in Ukraine, and is providing assistance.

In practical terms at the time of writing (late May 2022), China has done little to translate these principles into practice:

At the UN: China abstained in the two key votes of February 28th and March 2nd, in the Security Council (SC) and General Assembly (GA) respectively, that condemned Russia’s invasion. The SC resolution was modified (using the word “invasion” rather than “aggression”) to win Chinese support, but failed to do so. The GA resolution, approved by 141 votes (73 percent of the UN membership), spoke of “aggression”, citing numerous provisions of the Charter and international law. China objected that the UN should take account of the “complex historical background” to Ukraine, and should safeguard “the universal security of all parties”. These issues would have been addressed in a South African resolution that failed to win enough preliminary votes to be discussed, and for which China would presumably have voted.

In April China failed to offer support to the Secretary-General’s mission

to Moscow and Ki'iv – nor did Britain or any other major power – and the failure of this mission led Antonio Guterres to conclude that there was currently no prospect of a diplomatic solution.

Negotiations: China has called on occasion for an “immediate ceasefire”, notably in a joint foreign ministers’ statement (25 March) with India. There is no hint that this has been raised directly with Russia, or indeed what substance there is to any dialogue with Putin. Some early discussions with Western leaders seem to have touched upon possible security guarantees for a neutral Ukraine, but this too has faded. China’s core position was set out in a dialogue between President Xi and EU leaders (1st April) in general terms. The root cause of the Ukraine crisis, said Xi, was “the regional security tensions in Europe that have built up over the years”, and a solution must be found “to accommodate the legitimate security concerns of all relevant parties.” The crisis should be handled properly, and one should not “take the wrong medicine, or focus on just one aspect of the issue.... The more critical the situation, the greater the need to stay level-headed.” The need for an immediate ceasefire, or for any other concrete action, was not mentioned in any reports of this meeting.

President Zelensky, in a video link with the Davos Conference (25 May), said that “at the moment” Ukraine was satisfied with China’s policy which was “better than helping the Russian Federation”. He admitted that “China has not taken any steps against Ukraine” but equally that no steps against Ukraine had been observed. We do not know whether Zelensky has received any private assurances from Beijing, but his careful choice of words underlines the ambiguity of Chinese policy.

Humanitarian aid. China has made much of its commitment to provide such aid, but by the end of May, Beijing had only reported the shipment of two tranches of aid, both in March, totalling US\$2.5 million in value. (Chinese television reported a third tranche of which there is no other record). While Ukraine will be grateful for what it can get, this has the appearance of a token commitment rather than outright support.

Dissenting voices

Chinese dissent from the official line of what may be termed “pro-Russian neutrality” has been scarce, and has struggled against strict guidelines to the official media and censorship of social media. An early flurry of criticism on *WeChat* and other social media was quickly stifled. Official newspapers and television have been forbidden to use the term “invasion” or even “war” — minor exceptions to the rule seem to be accidental.

China's apparent neutral stance is undermined by the constant recycling of Russian propaganda, as notably over the Bucha massacre. China said it was suspending judgement until an impartial enquiry has been conducted, but its media repeated Russian claims that the civilian victims were actors, or had been shot by Ukrainian forces, while failing to publish any contrary narrative from Ukrainian sources..

By the end of May, only a handful of critics of Russian aggression and China's stance could be identified. A call on Russia to stop the war issued early on by five academics was quickly censored. Two other academics have expressed concern in a more acceptable form. Wang Huiwao, president of the Center for China Globalization, contributed a guest essay to the *New York Times* (13 March) under the headline "It's Time to Offer Russia an Offramp: China Can Help with That". Hu Wei, an advisor at the State Council Counsellor's Office, published a commentary in the *US-China Perception Monitor* (12 March) concluding that "China is the only country in the world with this capability [to stop Putin's adventure], and it must give full play to this unique advantage." Over the next two months, there were no more expressions of even such moderate dissent.

Hu was right that China is the only country that can rein in Putin, and academic and business professionals in the US and Europe with connections to China have been urging this upon their Chinese contacts and friends. Some of the responses reflect considerable disquiet, but an understandable reluctance to speak out.

In conclusion

The call for China to seek an immediate ceasefire and international mediation over Ukraine needs to be matched by a similar call on Western governments, particularly the US and Britain, not to insist on pursuing the war till a (probably unachievable) Ukrainian victory. This readiness to fight to the last Ukrainian is immoral and dangerous, and both countries, together with China, have a special duty under the UN Charter as Security Council members to work for international peace. This should mean supporting the Secretary-General in his mediating role, mobilising opinion in the General Assembly for an immediate ceasefire, and beginning to discuss a possible UN peace-keeping force. The UN is only "useless", as self-declared realists proclaim, if it is not used. To stop this terrible war that poses an existential risk to the world will require a profound change in thinking and far more active diplomacy, both in Beijing and in Western capitals: it is undoubtedly an uphill task, but it has to be undertaken.