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Where is China?

Sitting on the Fence is Not a Wise Policy

(1340 words)

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The Chinese government likes to portray its country as a “**responsible major power.**” Yet in the raging and still escalating conflict in Ukraine, China is largely absent. Beijing’s view of the profound crisis in eastern Europe is **contradictory and ill-thought through.**

At worst China can be seen as giving full support for Russia’s aggressive behavior in Ukraine. At best Beijing’s attitude could be characterized as one of sitting on the fence.

This is hardly sufficient for the world’s second largest economic and increasingly important geopolitical power. China ought to **become a major mediator** in this terrible conflict. Beijing should do its best to **demonstrate its sense of global responsibility** in one of the worst global crises for decades.

Rising to the Occasion

Otherwise, China may be **missing a major opportunity** to improve its tarnished global image, achieve reconciliation with the U.S. and other

countries to some extent, and assume a responsible leadership position, which a country with the military and economic might China has at its disposal, ought to exercise.

While some countries and individual leaders have risen to the occasion and realized that major new departures are needed, others seem to be **asleep at the wheel**. During such a deep geopolitical and above all humanitarian crisis, a passive “wait and see”-policy appears to indicate a deep misunderstanding of what may well turn out to be a **major turning point in global politics**.

Admittedly, quite a few countries initially wobbled and hesitated to face the new realities but some of them managed to catch the departing bus.

The **new German government** comes to mind which, after turning down military aid to Ukraine and trying to continue a somewhat benign policy of engagement with Russia, dramatically changed course as announced in Chancellor Scholz’s speech to the *Bundestag* last Sunday.

Even **neutral Switzerland** decided, somewhat reluctantly in view of Switzerland’s role as a financial hub for the world’s richest people and firms, to fully implement the severe sanctions the EU has imposed on Russia.

There will be a **long and enduring discussion** about whether or not the expansion of NATO from 1998 onwards was responsible for escalating tension with Russia over the years and whether or not many chances were missed to enter into a serious new European security agreement with Putin during the last few months.

But no country (and no analyst) should be allowed to hide behind the ‘big ifs’ of history. All this **does not excuse the resort to war**, the destruction of towns and cities and the brutal killing of innocent civilians. This also applies to China and its various media outlets.

The Chinese leadership expected 2022 to become a joyous year. The 2022 Olympics were meant to be a success as big as the 2008 summer Olympics in Beijing and the pandemic would be overcome soon. The 50th anniversary of Nixon's visit to China would also be duly commemorated and the contrast between the impoverished China of 1972 and the country's global power, wealth and influence 50 years later would impress the world. Then in October Xi Jinping would be "re-elected" for an unprecedented third term in power to continue with his strong leadership of the country and the further expansion of China's global influence and containment of U.S. influence in the Indo Pacific and elsewhere.

Instead, the Ukraine crisis exploded and is now the dominant issue in global politics. **China is sitting on the fence between Russia and the EU and does not dare to come down on either side.**

The *Diplomat's* [Chauncey Jung](#) has aptly described Beijing as having a "**convoluted position** of calling for countries to respect the sovereignty of Ukraine while respecting the legitimacy of the Russian security needs."

China between Russia and the West

Respect for the territorial integrity of other countries and non-interference in their domestic affairs has been a long-standing principle of Chinese foreign policy. Yet, China's **unwise intensification of its relationship with Russia**, as demonstrated in the joint Xi-Putin statement on February 4, 2022, has already begun to haunt Beijing. While Beijing may not have minded some tension between Russia and the West, China was not interested in the outbreak of war and being associated with a bloodthirsty quasi-ally.

It remains unclear, however, **whether Xi knew about Putin's invasion plan** and agreed with it when they met in Beijing in early February. While, according to the [New York Times](#), the Biden administration passed some of

their intelligence information to the Chinese to make China put pressure on Moscow to refrain from an invasion, Beijing may not have trusted the information it received from Washington.

In the meantime, **China has helped Russia's sanction-depressed economy** and relaxed restrictions on imports of Russian wheat, as agreed during Putin's visit to the Beijing Olympics in early February. A skeptical [article](#) written by five Chinese history professors who criticized Russia's invasion of Ukraine on humanitarian grounds was quickly removed from the internet by the Chinese censors.

On the same day, however, **China abstained from the Security Council resolution** on February 26, which condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and demanded the immediate withdrawal of its forces. In all likelihood, Putin expected that China would support him and veto the resolution.

Clearly, China has realized that China's links with the western world, in particular the EU but also the U.S., are **much more valuable** than its bond with Russia. Trade with Moscow makes up just 2.5 per cent of China's global trade while despite the profession of "deepening" ties in many parts of the world, Russia and China are geopolitical rivals and view each other suspiciously.

In particular, this is the case in the **Caucasus and Central Asia**, where China is increasingly encroaching economically on Russia's traditional spheres of interest. At present an uneasy *modus vivendi* seems to have been reached, however. Chinese influence has also significantly increased in the vast and resource-rich but thinly populated **Siberia**. In the border areas in Siberia a population of a mere 6 million Russians faces 90 million Chinese.

Perhaps not that many tears would be shed in Beijing if Putin lost the war in Ukraine and was severely weakened as a consequence, provided that he managed to stay in power.

By contrast in 2021 **China has become the largest trading partner for both the EU and Ukraine.** And Ukraine is also an important country within China's Belt and Road Initiative. In a **phone conversation** between Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi and his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba on March 1, 2022, Wang professed that he was "deeply grieved" and "highly concerned" about the situation.

And despite all the difficulties and geopolitical tension and the disappointing results of Trump's "Phase One" trade deal with Beijing of January 2020, economic, trade and technological **relations with the U.S. remain of the utmost importance for China.**

Still, **Russia has become one of the few important allies China has** in the world. Beijing and Moscow agree that U.S. and western dominance in the world needs to be curtailed. Not least Xi and Putin share similar **historical grievances** of the manifold humiliations they have both suffered at the hands of the West. Apparently, they also understand each other and get on well at a personal level.

Putin's defeat in Ukraine and possible ouster from power are not in China's overall interest. The destruction of Ukraine, further animosity with the U.S. and China's loss of Europe as an economic partner for supporting Russia is hardly in China's interest either. There is also the very real danger of China becoming an international pariah for supporting Putin's cruel and ruthless war in Ukraine.

Thus, would it not make sense **if Beijing stopped supporting Russia's outrageous war effort and came down from its fence** to prod Putin

toward making peace via negotiations? Perhaps China might make an **excellent mediator** to push heads together and get Moscow and Kiev to agree on an acceptable compromise deal to stop the war.

The EU and the U.S. would not be opposed to any promising mediator, including China, who could stop the carnage. It would also **demonstrate China's sense of global responsibility** which, so far, appears to be sadly absent.

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Books recently published by Klaus Larres:

- *Uncertain Allies: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Threat of a United Europe* (Yale University Press, 2022);
- *Dictators and Autocrats: Securing Power Across Global Politics* (edited book, Routledge, 2022);
- *Terrorism and Transatlantic Relations: Threats and Challenges* (co-edited with Tobias Hof, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).





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