

The Enemy of My Enemy:
What China Will Learn from the Russia-Ukraine Crisis

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10 February 2022

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Abstract

As a strategic competitor, China is carefully watching how the US responds to the Russia-Ukraine crisis to guide future efforts employing diplomatic, information, and economic, instruments of power. Diplomatically, China will determine the strength of US resolve to support Ukraine, as it may indicate the US level of commitment to the defense of overseas allies, such as Taiwan. While the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) unified response may signal the strength of Western alliances, China will continue to seek opportunities to exacerbate division and drive apart Western alliances. China will work alongside Russia to use information warfare to undermine US strategic messaging and create an information environment that increases the chances of miscalculation. Despite the array of sanction types considered by the Biden Administration, China is postured to circumvent sanctions and reduce the overall impact on Russia's economy. Regardless of US warnings, China will likely see the situation as a diplomatic and economic opportunity to develop closer relations with Russia and grow their influence in the global market. Therefore, China will use the Russia-Ukraine crisis as a litmus test to understand and subsequently counter US-led overseas initiatives to advance their strategic goals.

Introduction

In October 2021, Russia began moving troops and military equipment towards Ukraine's eastern border. By December 2021, over 100,000 Russian troops were observed near the border with armor, missiles, and other heavy weaponry.¹ This development stoked US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) concerns that the staging of military personnel and assets could indicate preparations for a Russian military incursion into Ukraine, similar to the Annexation of Crimea in 2014. In subsequent negotiations, the Russian foreign ministry continues to assert that forces will only be withdrawn if Ukraine is banned from future NATO membership and if NATO commits to reducing its military footprint in Eastern Europe. In response, the US and NATO have repeatedly rejected these demands and threatened to levy sanctions should Russia take any action to invade Ukraine. As the world watches the situation unfold at the Russia-Ukraine border, China is closely observing the US response, adjusting its decision-making calculus, and drawing key conclusions about US behavior. These observations will guide China's future employment of diplomacy, information, and economic levers of power within the international space.

US Resolve and the Strength of Western Alliances

In the diplomatic sphere, China is following the US and NATO response to the Russia-Ukraine crisis because it may indicate the US level of commitment to supporting global partners, including Taiwan. China aims to establish a sphere of influence within the Asia-Pacific region and sees US power projection through regional allies as the primary obstacle to this goal. Furthermore, China considers peripheral states, such as Hong Kong, Tibet, and Taiwan, to pose an existential threat to China's national sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a result, the

¹ "Conflict in Ukraine," Global Conflict Tracker, Council on Foreign Relations, last modified January 28, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>.

President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping, continues to emphasize that Taiwan "reunification" is a strategic priority that "cannot be dragged on generation after generation."² However, the "unofficial relationship" between the US and Taiwan continues to stand in their way.

Despite the clear geographical, historical, and contextual differences between Ukraine and Taiwan, some parallels can be drawn between their respective situations. As free, liberal, democratic states, both Ukraine and Taiwan are ideologically aligned with the US. Ukraine and Taiwan maintain positive bilateral relationships with the US, but also face significant pressure from Great Power Competitors with territorial interests within their countries. The US-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership emphasizes bilateral security and defensive relationships and outlines US support for "a strong, independent, and democratic Ukraine, capable of defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity."³ The agreement encourages Ukraine's interoperability with NATO without necessarily endorsing its full membership.⁴ On the other hand, the Taiwan Relations Act affirms US commitment to Taiwan's defense by providing "arms of a defensive character" to maintain a "sufficient self-defense capacity."⁵

Since neither the US-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership nor the Taiwan Relations Act specify how the US would support the defense of Ukraine or Taiwan respectively, the US maintains significant latitude to choose how to provide support. If the US reacts strongly to a Russian invasion of Ukraine, levying heavy economic sanctions and committing military forces to the region, China may be temporarily deterred from launching an invasion of Taiwan.

² Lu Hui, "Xi says 'China must be, will be reunified' as key anniversary marked," *Xinhua News Agency*, January 2, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/02/c_137714898.htm.

³ U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership*, November 10, 2021.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Taiwan Relations Act*, January 1, 1979.

However, should the US choose a limited response or fail to respond entirely, China may be more motivated to attempt forceful reunification with Taiwan knowing that the US is unlikely to interfere. In this way, China will look closely at the US response to draw parallels from the Russia-Ukraine situation to determine the US level of commitment to supporting overseas partners when facing a Great Power.

Moreover, China will observe NATO's collective response to the Russia-Ukraine crisis to determine the strength and unity of Western alliances. As observed by Theresa Fallon, the director of the Center for Russia Europe Asia Studies in Brussels, "China is always watching and seeing how Western alliances like NATO are holding up under pressure."⁶ Therefore, the Russia-Ukraine crisis, "is about much more than just Ukraine... it's also a broader stress test for the West from Beijing's point of view."⁷ When addressing the Russia-Ukraine crisis, Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoana reaffirmed that NATO "continues to consult and coordinate with close partners, including Ukraine and the EU."⁸ However, Germany and France, the two most powerful NATO member states, have stymied US efforts to coordinate a unified response. Germany refuses to issue permits for weapons originated in Germany, preventing Estonia, a NATO member state, from sending artillery pieces to Ukraine. Although German leadership insists this is consistent with existing policy regarding arms exports to potential conflict areas, it creates the perception of Germany is hesitant to support Ukraine in a crisis.⁹ Additionally,

⁶ Reid Standish, "China Closely Watching Western Handling of Ukrainian-Russian Tensions," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 30, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-russia-ukraine-crisis-standish/31678140.html>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO and EU Ambassadors meet to discuss crisis in Ukraine," February 3, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_191389.htm.

⁹ Michael R. Gordon, Bojan Pancevski, "Germany Blocks NATO Ally from Transferring Weapons to Ukraine," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2022, accessed February 3, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/germany-blocks-nato-ally-from-transferring-weapons-to-ukraine-11642790772>.

French President Emmanuel Macron has engaged in bilateral conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and proposed that the European Union (EU) formulate a separate policy towards Russia in coordination with NATO.¹⁰ Through the “Normandy Format,” Germany and France have negotiated directly with Russia and Ukraine, considering themselves to be mediators with the intention of deescalating tensions.¹¹ Nonetheless, Germany and France’s actions independent of the US and NATO may signal to strategic competitors that the US does not require a seat at the table, cutting the US out of the process and fracturing Western alliances. Absent of a formal alliance between the US and Asia-Pacific allies, namely Japan and South Korea, China may infer that the US may also have difficulty coordinating a unified response against an invasion of Taiwan.

Strategic Messaging and Information Operations

China will observe the US response to the Russia-Ukraine situation to tailor information warfare campaigns to undermine US credibility. Russia and China have already demonstrated a robust information warfare capability, leveraging an array of communication platforms, such as government officials, state-sponsored media sources, and social media platforms to influence domestic and international perceptions of their ruling governments.¹² The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) released findings that revealed China knowingly amplified conspiracy theories and disinformation about “the origins of COVID-19, unproven cures for the disease, and

¹⁰ Anton Troianovski, Aurelien Breeden, “Putin and Macron talk again by phone, keeping diplomatic lines open,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 2022, accessed February 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/world/europe/putin-macron-ukraine.html>.

¹¹ Jenny Hill, “Why Germany isn’t sending weapons to Ukraine,” *BBC*, January 28, 2022, accessed February 3, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60155002?piano-modal>.

¹² Reid Standish, “Study Shows How Russian, Chinese Disinformation About COVID-19 Evolved During The Pandemic,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 2, 2021, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-china-covid-disinformation-campaigns/31590996.html>.

the efficacy of vaccines.”¹³ The study further revealed that China’s messages focused on bolstering public image by conveying self-confidence, consistency, and the capability of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in handling the COVID-19 pandemic, while deflecting accusations that the virus may have originated in Wuhan, China. On the contrary, Russian information campaigns were “more focused on creating chaos regardless of whether it contradicts the Kremlin’s official version.” Edward Lucas of the Center for European Policy Analysis observes that while China disinformation focuses on cultivating a positive public image, Russian disinformation is more focused on “exploiting disunity and polarization that already exists in the West.”¹⁴

Despite these differing approaches, both China’s and Russia’s information warfare tactics can be directly translated to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, undermining US strategic messaging and painting the US as the aggressor. Despite an observed military build-up near the border with Ukraine, Russia continues to assert that US and NATO concerns are unfounded, denying any plans of invasion and accusing the US of “whipping up tensions.”¹⁵ China has supported this messaging, warning the US and NATO not to “hype up the crisis,” and validating Russia’s claims by arguing its “reasonable security concerns should be taken seriously.”¹⁶ On February 3, 2022, Russia and China’s foreign ministries met to coordinate their positions on

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Derek Saul, “White House Confirms Plan to Impose Sanctions Against Kremlin’s ‘Inner Circle,’” *Forbes Magazine*, January 31, 2022, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dereksaul/2022/01/31/white-house-confirms-plan-to-impose-sanctions-against-kremlins-inner-circle/?sh=2e9e7d4432a9>.

¹⁶ Standish, “China Closely Watching Western Handling of Ukrainian-Russian Tensions.”

Ukraine, with China expressing “understanding and support” for Russia’s position.¹⁷ In this way, Russia and China are using strategic messaging to turn the narrative against the US and reinforce narratives portraying Russia as an innocent victim.¹⁸

Moving forward, China can use disinformation to reinforce Russian initiatives, such as exacerbating division within the US population and driving the US away from Western alliances. China can use disinformation to raise doubts surrounding US motivations for moving troops into Eastern Europe. Highlighting the disparate approaches of NATO member states towards the Russia-Ukraine crisis can also create the perception of a weakened, disjointed alliance. With Russian disinformation campaigns focused on creating chaos, Russia may also seek to create conditions that lead to miscalculation, hoping the US will make a mistake by acting first. As Russia and China have already demonstrated highly effective information operations campaigns, there may be opportunities for both nations to work in tandem to turn public opinion against the US, foment domestic and international disunity, and create conditions that could lead to miscalculation.

Economic Impact of US Sanctions

China will predict the targets and monitor the overall impact of US sanctions on the Russian economy. On January 19, President Joe Biden warned that the US and its allies are ready to impose “severe economic consequences,” should Russia invade Ukraine.”¹⁹ The Biden

¹⁷ “China, Russia ‘coordinated positions’ on Ukraine, says Chinese foreign ministry,” *Reuters*, February 3, 2022, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/china-russia-coordinated-positions-ukraine-says-chinese-foreign-ministry-2022-02-03/>.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, “Russia’s Top Five Persistent Disinformation Narratives,” Office of the Spokesperson, January 20, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/russias-top-five-persistent-disinformation-narratives/>.

¹⁹ Joe Biden, “Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference,” White House Briefing Room, January 19, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/01/19/remarks>

Administration has stated that “all options remain on the table,” and may include an array of sanctions that focus on three key facets of Russia’s economy: financial firms and services, energy corporations, and individuals.²⁰ Since some Russian banks have been sanctioned since the Annexation of Crimea, the US may expand existing sanctions to encompass more financial institutions, target the state-sponsored Russian Direct Investment Fund, or even cut off Russia from the global financial system by blocking access to the Society of Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT).²¹ The US and EU are also considering options to increase the breadth and depth of sanctions on energy and defense sectors, such as targeting Nord Stream 2, a Russian-built natural gas pipeline running between Russia and Germany. While Germany announced it would be willing to halt the Nord Stream 2 pipeline if Russia invaded Ukraine, the US is also considering sanctions on the pipeline through the Defending Ukraine Sovereignty Act of 2022.²² On an individual level, US President Joe Biden has considered sanctions directly against Russian President Putin. The White House also announced the development of “specific sanctions packages for both Russian elites and their family members” that are considered “complicit in the Kremlin’s destabilizing behavior” in Ukraine.²³ The United Kingdom revealed a similar sanctions plan targeting the Kremlin’s “inner circle” should Russia

-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-6/.

²⁰ Alan Rappeport, “What a Disconnect From Swift Would Mean for Russia,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 2022, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/us/politics/russia-swift.html?smid=url-share>.

²¹ Karin Strohecker, “Explainer: How Western sanctions might target Russia,” *Reuters*, January 26, 2022, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/how-financial-western-sanctions-might-target-russia-2022-01-19/>.

²² Barbara Sprunt, “Senators make headway on Russia sanctions bill, but 2 sticking points remain,” *National Public Radio*, February 2, 2022, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/02/1077589147/senators-make-headway-on-russia-sanctions-bill-but-two-sticking-points-remain>.

²³ Saul, “White House Confirms Plan to Impose Sanctions Against Kremlin’s ‘Inner Circle.’”

invade Ukraine. Therefore, the US and NATO possess a wide variety of economic levers that can be employed to deter Russia from potentially invading Ukraine.

Nevertheless, the anticipated impact of sanctions will be offset by Russia's domestic resiliency and China's ability to lessen the economic blow. Following the Annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has adjusted to life under US sanctions and developed mechanisms to overcome economic shortfalls. For example, Russia developed its own financial messaging systems that can keep financial firms connected to global markets without access to SWIFT.²⁴ By purchasing Iranian and North Korean oil under US sanctions, China has demonstrated a willingness to blatantly circumvent sanctions to protect its own economic interests. Therefore, China may be willing to repeat the favor by purchasing Russian oil, which provides 39% of Russia's federal budget revenue and 60% of Russian exports in 2019.²⁵ Since China surpassed Russia as Ukraine's primary trade partner, China may consider using economic coercion to drive a wedge between Ukraine and NATO.²⁶ China can also use its economic advantages to provide goods and services to Eastern Europe previously supplied by Russia, furthering diplomatic relations and undermining the collective strength of the EU. Although the US State Department has threatened Chinese firms with severe consequences should they seek to circumvent sanctions or evade export controls imposed on Russia in the event of an incursion into Ukraine, China is unlikely to

²⁴ Rapoport, "What a Disconnect From Swift Would Mean for Russia."

²⁵ Michael Crowley, Edward Wong, "U.S. Sanctions Aimed at Russia Could Take a Wide Toll," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2022, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/29/us/politics/russia-sanctions-economy.html?smid=url-share>.

²⁶ Jonathan Masters, "Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia," Council on Foreign Relations, last modified December 2, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/background/ukraine-conflict-crossroads-europe-and-russia>.

heed these warnings.²⁷ China remains in a position to undermine the impact of sanctions and will likely respond to US sanctions on Russia by developing closer ties with Russia and increasing opportunities for bilateral trade with Eastern Europe.

Conclusion

Both Russia and China perceive the Russia-Ukraine crisis as an opportunity to advance their strategic goals and test the limits of US and Western alliances. By identifying a common enemy in the US, these strategic competitors can work together to counter US influence in the international environment. With President Putin visiting China to hold a summit with President Xi prior to the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, this relationship will only continue to grow closer.²⁸ China will follow the US response to the Russia-Ukraine crisis and employ diplomatic, information, and economic levers of power to counter US-led efforts. In kind, the US must work closer than ever to unify NATO allies in support of Ukraine to resist Russian and Chinese attempts to exploit weaknesses or change the narrative. However, the US must also be aware of the impact of these actions on China, and take deliberate actions to reassure all partners, including Taiwan, building up US-led alliances, and moving forward to combat disinformation campaigns with the truth.

²⁷ Simon Lewis, David Brunnstrom, "U.S. warns Chinese firms against helping Russia against potential Ukraine sanctions," *Reuters*, February 3, 2022, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-says-china-ties-will-not-make-up-consequences-russian-invasion-ukraine-2022-02-03/>.

²⁸ Standish, "China Closely Watching Western Handling of Ukrainian-Russian Tensions."

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