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Bush China Foundation Brief: Report on U.S.-China Strategic Policy Dialogue on Ukraine

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Over two months after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, the war's outcomes and Russia's endgame remain unclear. In response to the Russian aggression, the United States, along with its allies and partners, provided security and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and imposed sweeping financial sanctions on Russia's economy, while working diplomatically to deescalate tensions. China abstained from voting on a United Nations Security Council resolution that condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and has portrayed itself as a neutral party in the conflict, although its relationship with Russia has grown increasingly close in recent years. Despite different perceptions of the root causes of the war and approaches to lowering tensions, the United States and China have a shared interest in ending the assault on the Ukrainian people and in Ukraine and Russia reaching a peace agreement.

To that end, the George H. W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations partnered with Peking University's Institute for Global Cooperation and Understanding to bring together academics and former diplomats from the United States and China for a closed-door discussion on Russia's war in Ukraine. The dialogue session was the third round of the track 2 U.S.-China Strategic Policy Dialogue series, which seeks to facilitate action-focused exchanges between the two countries and was launched in May of last year.

THE UKRAINE CRISIS

Russia's actions and the West's reactions

Russian President Vladimir Putin's true intentions for a full-scale invasion are obscure, but one thing is certain: his intentions went far beyond the pretext of protecting Russian compatriots in provinces in eastern Ukraine. In the lead up to it, he demanded security guarantees from the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that Ukraine never join NATO and that the alliance pull back its forces from its eastern border. Russia has complained about NATO's "five waves of enlargement" eastward alongside Russia's borders since the 1990s, and it repeatedly warned that NATO's leaving the door open for Georgia and Ukraine to join the alliance was a "red line," which NATO and the United States ignored. When Putin was unable to achieve his goals at the negotiation table, he turned to changing realities on the ground (see the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the 2014 Crimea crisis as history repeated itself).

Many in the West believed that Russia knew its demands were "nonstarters" and called out the exaggeration of the threats posed by NATO, a defense alliance that focuses on protecting its members. The conflict nevertheless demonstrated the direct consequences of failure in diplomatic efforts for the Ukrainian people. The Chinese side, in contrast, posited that the West pushed Russia into a corner by triggering Russia's security dilemma and is hence responsible for the spiraling tensions over Ukraine.

In response to the Russian warfare against Ukraine, the West hit Russia with tough sanctions and provided military aid to Ukraine to support its self-defense and insurgency. Although U.S. efforts started as safeguarding the core principles of international law and human rights, they have turned aggressive and increasingly aimed toward limiting Russian power on the world stage. This shift concerned the Chinese side, especially given their deep distrust of U.S. intentions and approaches, viewing the West's support for a long-term Ukrainian insurgency as prolonging the conflict. From a realpolitik perspective, the Chinese side claimed that the war has been beneficial for the United States vis-à-vis a now militarily and economically weakened Russia. They believed the U.S. is predisposed to a cold war mentality that has prevented it from addressing Russia's security concerns through dialogue.

Putin's miscalculation

Russia's intentions for Ukraine gave Putin a sense of urgency to act. Putin regards Ukraine's eastern flank as an integral part of Russia and perceived the military and political trends near the Russo-Ukrainian border as increasingly unfavorable and threatening to Russia's security. To Putin, a Western-allied Ukraine seemed imminent. Although he underestimated the military challenge and local resistance Russia would face in Ukraine, his biggest miscalculation has been to underestimate the West's resolve. He had sent troops into sovereign nations before without encountering stiff pushback from the West. In fact, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to export more Russian gas to Germany was approved just a year after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Several developments in the West might have convinced Putin to act at this time, including global democratic backsliding paired with the rise of populism, a divided Western alliance and soaring energy prices in Europe. Russia's strengthened partnership with China that is built on shared, fundamental antipathy to the U.S. and, by extension, the West also might have factored into Putin's calculus. The fact that Russia and China view themselves as "targets" of U.S. containment strategy could amount to support for one another in times of distress, as Chinese participants suggested. In China's view, its relations with the United States have a role to play in their response to this conflict (see more in the "Role of U.S.-China" section below).

Ideological framing

The conflict is often characterized as part of the grand struggle between autocracy and democracy, a 21st century inflection point that the Biden administration has repeatedly emphasized. This value-based framing has so far been successful in corraling international and domestic support against Russia. For example, blaming inflation on Russia helps explain why people are suffering from rocketing energy prices.

However, the framing's drawbacks are plenty. It plays into the narrative that this is a war between the West and "the rest", diverting attention away from the reality that this was Russia's attempt at a post-colonial land grab and that it clearly violates international law. The narrative also may have dissuaded some countries from playing a larger role to help resolve the ongoing crisis.

DIVERSITY OF OPINIONS WITHIN CHINA

There is predominant sympathy within China toward Russia's perceived threat of NATO expansion toward Ukraine. This sentiment, coupled with a genuine belief in Russian propaganda and disinformation about the denazification of Ukraine and Ukraine being the aggressor, is often coupled with a critique of the West. The Chinese side blames the U.S. and NATO's militarization of the region as being provocative and thus the root causes of the conflict. This view results in a Chinese rhetoric about the war that comes remarkably close to that of Russia, which describes the attack as a "special military operation," rather than an "invasion." The Chinese side justified the cautious rhetoric as necessary to help deescalate tensions and leave room for negotiation and dialogue.

However, there is a diversity of opinions among the Chinese participants. One participant echoed the West's position in calling Russia's actions a violation of the United Nations Charter and questioned the actual threat of NATO's eastward expansion vis-à-vis Russia's perceived threat from the lens of Russia's traditional security outlook and domestic politics. Although views that the West's support of the Ukrainian resistance and sanctions regime are counterproductive and are prolonging the conflict are widespread, one Chinese participant posited that these measures could help bring Russia to the negotiation table.

On balance, China's purported neutrality embraces inherent contradictions: it rebuts the demonization of Russia, while opposing the use of force to change the international order and calling for the preservation of Ukraine's sovereignty. This seemingly contradictory and nuanced stance on the crisis stems from China's view that the war is between Russia and the West, its priority of balancing foreign relations and mitigating the negative spillover from the crisis and the current state of U.S.-China relations.

THE ROLE OF U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

The war in Ukraine is a test for a U.S.-China relationship that has already deteriorated significantly over the past few years, and it will have serious implications for the direction of the relationship in years to come. The United States wants China to distance itself from Russia, but China has yet to abandon its partnership with Russia despite the fault lines in their worldviews. From China's perspective, it is unreasonable for the U.S. to expect China's support for the West's campaigns against Russia while at the same time seeking to contain China on all fronts. It sees Russia as a partner to counter isolation from a potentially more unified democratic world. Therefore, China's response to the conflict is linked to its intense competition with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific. This explains why the Taiwan issue was repeatedly brought up by the Chinese side when the West requested its help with the Russia-Ukraine war.

There is no denying that resolving the conflict is a shared interest between the U.S. and China. Both sides highlighted the importance of adopting a more pragmatic approach, such as working together under the United Nations framework and taking the "democracy vs. autocracy" framing out of the crisis. Although divergent views of the conflict and the ongoing geostrategic rivalry remain as obstacles, there lie tremendous opportunities for both countries to build confidence and momentum for cooperation in promoting peace and stability for people across the globe.

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