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China-Russia Relations in the Wake of Ukraine: Another Step Up in Beijing's Strive for Great Power Status



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SYNOPSIS

While Russian leader Vladimir Putin's so-called "special military operation" in Ukraine has been roundly condemned by most of the international community, China has refused to denounce the invasion; indeed, China has perpetuated Moscow's narrative by portraying the war as being provoked by the US-led NATO. Despite Western attempts to draw Beijing away from Moscow by portraying the decision as being on the "wrong side of history", China has so far refused to abandon its Eurasian neighbour — for good reasons.

COMMENTARY

The death and destruction ordered by Russian president Vladimir Putin in the nearly year-long conflict in Ukraine has had far-reaching consequences in Europe and across the world. Not only has it sent energy prices soaring, it has also exacerbated the cost of living and inflationary pressures caused by supply chain disruptions arising from the ongoing pandemic.

While Moscow has been roundly condemned by the West and much of the international community for its blatant violation of Kyiv's sovereignty and territorial integrity since 24 February 2022, it has nevertheless been able to count on a handful of countries, including Iran, Myanmar and North Korea, for solidarity. More than drawing support from these pariah states, however, Putin has also been able to seek solace in the backing of at least one major power: China.

Although most European governments have since reduced their reliance on Russian fossil fuels in addition to imposing economic sanctions on Moscow, a part of Russia's lost energy trade has been offset by some of Asia's major economies, most notably India and China. Indeed, since the start of the conflict, Beijing and others have been exploiting Moscow's predicament by increasing their purchases of discounted Russian hydrocarbons and other commodities — while avoiding those transactions that might risk secondary sanctions. In light of the collapse in imports from the West and the high returns

from selling oil and gas to non-Western economies, Russia was even able to enjoy a record trade surplus in the second quarter of 2022.¹

TURNING ADVERSITY INTO ADVANTAGE

Since the war began, China's official stance has been to be all things to all people: with their Western and Ukrainian counterparts, Chinese diplomats maintain that their government supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine; with their Russian interlocutors on the other hand, they parrot Moscow's position that it was the expansion of the US-led NATO security alliance that had pushed Putin to launch his so-called "special military operation".

Although Beijing's decision to sit on the fence has been criticised as disingenuous, given its so-called no-limits agreement with Moscow signed just prior to the conflict, Zhongnanhai has paid no heed to any such disapprobation. Apart from Putin's acknowledgement last September of his counterpart's "concerns" over the invasion coinciding with a string of humiliating reversals suffered by Russia on the battlefield,² Chinese leader Xi Jinping has by and large stood by his fellow autocrat in the Kremlin. Despite the US warning that China risked being "on the wrong side of history",³ Beijing has stood its ground — in stark contrast to its discomfiture at the start of the war when Xi's no-limits partnership with Putin was interpreted by some analysts as China's tacit endorsement of the invasion.

Beijing's stance on the Ukraine crisis should come as no surprise. With Chinese leaders realising that anything but a contrarian position would deprive them of much-needed diplomatic space to manoeuvre, they have refrained from criticising Moscow — publicly, at least.⁴ As well as keeping to the adage that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", China is cognisant that its disagreements with Washington and the other Western powers would not simply disappear even if it were to side with Kyiv.⁵ Moreover, there is utility to be exploited in its resource-rich neighbour, weakened by Putin's foolhardiness.

RUSSIA'S ECONOMY: RIPE FOR THE PICKING

The financial retaliation by the West has taken a toll on Russia's economy. Having been thrown out of the international financial system and no longer able to access high-tech imports, Russia's economy is believed to have shrunk by 6 to 10% in 2022, according to some studies. Along with a projected 17% decrease in investments, household and business consumption had supposedly also been reduced by as much as 15%. With basic goods in short supply as well, factories also encountered production problems.⁶

Indeed, as much as Putin has been able to marshal resources to offset the effects of the sanctions at the start of his war, his country's own dependence on European markets to offload its oil and gas supplies cannot be changed at whim. With most existing pipelines leading to Europe having since been discontinued or abandoned, the lack of infrastructure to cool Russian gas and ship it in the form of liquefied natural gas means that the sanctions are likely to lead to greater economic tragedy for Russia.

It is under such circumstances that Beijing has further entrenched itself on Moscow's financial and economic landscape. Unlike the European countries cut off from Russian oil and gas by Putin in retaliation for their backing of Ukraine, China has been able to reap the rewards of cut-price energy — in the process, increasing imports from Russia by 48.8% to US\$61.45 billion in the first seven months of the war. Flowing in the opposite direction, China's exports to Russia likewise grew slightly by 5.2%.⁷

Beijing and Moscow have also targeted 2024 for the “Asian Force Siberia 2” gas pipeline to begin its annual delivery of 50 billion cubic metres of gas to China.⁸ With Russia’s growing reliance on its neighbour for technology, trade and economic support, transactions are expected to be carried out in renminbi increasingly. As one foreign affairs expert has opined, Beijing’s growing leverage over Moscow may one day even give it access to the most advanced Russian military equipment and technology.⁹

A STEP UP IN BEIJING’S MAJOR POWER AMBITIONS

Realpolitik necessarily dictates that in the vagaries of international politics it is every state for itself. Whereas Beijing and Moscow continue to view Washington and the Western liberal democratic model as antithetical to their own authoritarian models of governance, that does not mean both will conduct their cooperation altruistically. Indeed, China and Russia continue to harbour mutual mistrust stemming from the Korean War¹⁰ — perhaps in part explaining why they are yet to enter into any formal politico–military alliance.

In fact, from China’s perspective, Russian military adventurism has drawn away US military attention, perhaps even diverting a part of Washington’s resources from the Indo-Pacific region. However, unlike the events of 9/11, which consumed US attention to the exclusion of other national security concerns until the later years of the Obama administration, it is unlikely Washington will allow itself to be distracted from its long-term strategic rival. Nevertheless, Putin’s misstep has granted Xi unexpected respite to bide his time further in preparation for China’s strategic confrontation with the world’s incumbent superpower.¹¹ Until then, Moscow offers some utility by supporting Chinese efforts to subvert the US-led global order.

Whatever the outcome of the fighting in Europe, China’s cold, hard calculus based on its own self-interests has confirmed its status as one of the world’s two most powerful countries. With Russia, slowly but surely, morphing into a pariah state in view of its increasing diplomatic isolation, Putin also betrayed his desperation for Chinese support — going as far as genuflecting on China’s claims over Taiwan during an audience with Xi. In its present trajectory, Beijing is expected to move further ahead of Moscow in the global order as it vies with Washington for top dog status. In siding with no one but itself on the Ukraine crisis, as opposed to taking a principled position, China’s stance is really not that perplexing.

¹ Philip Inman, “Behind Moscow’s Bluster, Sanctions Are Making Russia Suffer”, *The Guardian*, 8 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/oct/08/behind-moscows-bluster-sanctions-are-making-russia-suffer>.

² Kremlin, “Meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping”, 15 September 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69356>.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on June 16, 2022”, 16 June 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202206/16_10704587.html.

⁴ Tan Dawn Wei, “Russia and China’s No-Limits Partnership May Have a Ceiling after All”, *The Straits Times*, 17 September 2022.

⁵ Alexander Gabuev, “China’s New Vassal”, *Foreign Affairs*, 9 August 2022.

⁶ Inman, “Behind Moscow’s Bluster”.

⁷ Gabuev, “China’s New Vassal”.

⁸ Nigel Li, “Comment: China and Russia Might Have Pledged ‘No Limits’ in their Friendship, but Limits Exist”, *Mothership*, 21 September 2022, <https://mothership.sg/2022/09/china-russia-limits-friendship/>.

⁹ Gabuev, “China’s New Vassal”.

¹⁰ Shen Zhihua, “Revisiting Stalin’s and Mao’s Motivations in the Korean War”, *Wilson Center*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/revisiting-stalins-and-maos-motivations-korean-war>.

¹¹ Andrey V. Vinogradov, “The Importance of Russia in China’s Foreign Relations”, *ThinkChina*, 14 March 2022, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/importance-russia-chinas-foreign-relations>.

¹² “Putin’s Taiwan Support Outweighs Any Xi Concerns about Ukraine”, *Bloomberg News*, 16 September 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-16/putin-s-taiwan-support-outweighs-any-xi-concerns-about-ukraine>.

Securing a Third Term: China’s Governance Strategy under Xi Jinping



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SYNOPSIS

With Xi Jinping having secured his third term as head of the Chinese Communist Party without a clear successor in sight, his governance strategy will exemplify continuity more than change. Domestic and international imperatives will shape the policy trajectory of the People’s Republic of China in the road ahead.

COMMENTARY

The year 2022 was an important year for the Xi Jinping leadership as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held its twice-a-decade party congress. The 20th congress, which started on 16 October, saw Xi secure a norm-defying third term in power, in addition to the much-anticipated unveiling of the party’s elite Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). Key phrases used in Xi’s speech included the terms security (anquan), science and technology (keji) in the context of technological self-reliance, and ideological concerns (yishi xingtai). In the lead-up to the event, there was little doubt in the minds of observers that the leadership line-up would be dominated by Xi loyalists, representing a shift from collective leadership to personalised rule. Xi’s six fellow members now on the PSC (Li Qiang, Zhao Leji, Wang Huning, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang and Li Xi) are all aligned with his faction.

China’s rise in the past decade has been defined by its growing economic footprint, pursuit of military modernisation and rising technology ambitions. In close parallel with this, Xi has taken a more assertive and confident posturing in the past decade, which has been encapsulated in his strategic policy vision of the “China dream” of “great national rejuvenation” (zhongguo meng). The result has been a marked departure in Xi’s policy approach from those of his predecessors, which were defined more by the policies of strategic reassurance — from Deng Xiaoping’s “biding time until the opportune moment” (taoguang yanghui) and Jiang Zemin’s “one superpower, many great powers” (yichao duoqiang) to Hu Jintao’s “striking some successes in doing something” (yousuo zuowei).

Having realised the party's first centenary goal of building a moderately prosperous China, the next stage for Xi would be to lead the party as it embarks on its next centenary goal of building a modern socialist country by the 100th anniversary of the PRC in 2049 — a country that Xi envisions as “prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious”. Other economic, political and security imperatives that will drive policy are a continuation of the “dual circulation strategy”, of which China has stressed greater domestic self-reliance and engagement with global economies on its own terms; the “Made in China 2025” and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); strengthening China's global image; as well as military modernisation, which is in keeping with Xi's goal of “winning local wars” (daying jubu zhanzheng) and transforming the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a “world-class army” (shijie yiliu jundui) by 2050.²

Meanwhile, as borders across the globe reopen and societies are learning to co-exist with the COVID-19 pandemic, there is little sign that Beijing is letting up on its costly and isolating zero-COVID policy. Although there appeared to be a discursive shift from a zero-COVID model to a model of “precise prevention and control, within the minimum range”, in August 2021, the shift appeared to be more rhetorical than substantive. CNN reported that between late August and early September 2022 lockdowns had been imposed in at least 74 cities across China, affecting 313 million people.³ The lockdowns affected entire cities, districts or multiple neighbourhoods, and as a result have exacted a toll on the economy.

On the issue of Taiwan's independence, Xi's opposition exhibits policy continuity, rather than change. The CCP has repeatedly emphasised that reunification has been the established line and historic mission of the party. At the 20th party congress, Xi stressed that China would not compromise on issues over Taiwan, asserting that “resolving the Taiwan issue is the Chinese people's own business, for the Chinese people to decide”, and that China would “never promise to renounce use of force” and would “reserve the option of taking all measures necessary”.

On the issue of Hong Kong, Xi's 20th party congress report stressed the party's “effective exercise of governance” over Hong Kong, citing as evidence the territory's transition from “chaos to governance”. Xi drew reference to two developments: the passage of the national security law (NSL), and the 2021 reforms to the electoral system.

The 2021 electoral process reforms include cutting the number of directly elected seats and the implementation of a more rigorous vetting process for candidates. Observers view this as a means of removing all opposition from the city's parliament, allowing Beijing to tighten its control over Hong Kong. The NSL was introduced on 30 June 2020 to snuff out all forms of dissent, and to “prevent, stop, and punish” what Beijing sees as “secession”, “subversion”, “terrorism”, and “collusion with foreign forces”. The passage of the NSL was followed by a wave of arrests of civil rights activists and opposition figures.

Amid sustained pushback from Western countries on China's human rights violations in Xinjiang, there was also a regional leadership reshuffle in 2021. In December, former Guangdong governor Ma Xingrui was appointed as Xinjiang's new party secretary, replacing Chen Quanguo, who had served during Xi's first and second terms. In line with Xi's emphasis at the Third Central Symposium on Xinjiang Work held in September 2020, Ma has spoken about the need to restore economic growth and to “normalise” (changtaihua) Xinjiang's counter-terrorism and ethnic stability issues according to the “rule of law” (fazhuhua).⁴ Nonetheless, Ma has kept with the stability-first approach to Xinjiang and pledged to “firmly promote continuous and long-term social stability”, and not allow any reversal of

the “hard-won stability”. In keeping with Xi's emphasis on national security, Ma also called for “creating a new situation for safeguarding national security in Xinjiang”.⁵

In sum, Xi's governing approach is underpinned by the regime's continued preoccupation with consolidating internal security — and by extension the security and legitimacy of the CCP. This is exemplified by the wide-scale anti-corruption campaign, similar to the moral rectification campaigns during the Mao era, to rid the party of excesses and root out corruption among both high-ranking officials and lower-level cadres. Looking ahead, the persistent emphasis on security foreshadows how the Xi administration in its new term is likely to continue to use Chinese foreign policy as a tool to secure the party's hold on power at home.

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² Li, Qingtong, “Xi Jinping Proposed to Realise the Goal of the Centenary Struggle of the Founding of the Military and to Create a New Phase for the Modernisation of the National Defence and Army”, Xinhua, 16 October 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20221101032810/http://www.mod.gov.cn/topnews/2022-10/16/content_4923589.htm

³ Nectar Gan and Shawn Deng, “Chinese Cities Rush to Lockdown in Show of Loyalty to Xi's ‘Zero-Covid’ Strategy”, CNN, 5 September 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/05/china/china-covid-lockdown-74-cities-intl-hnk/index.html>

⁴ Xinhua, “Xi Jinping: Adhere to the Rule of Law in Xinjiang, Unite and Stabilise Xinjiang Culture, Enrich Xinjiang, Enrich the People, Rejuvenate Xinjiang, Build Xinjiang for a Long Time, and Strive to Build a New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”, 26 September 2020. https://web.archive.org/web/20221101045716/http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-09/26/c_1126544371.htm

⁵ C. Lizzi Lee, “What Can We Expect from Xinjiang's New Party Boss Ma Xingrui?” The China Project, 29 September 2022, <https://thechinaproject.com/2021/12/29/what-can-we-expect-from-xinjiangs-new-party-boss-ma-xingrui/>; Darren Byler Darren, “In Xinjiang, a New Normal under a New Chief — and Also More of the Same”, The China Project, 2 March 2022. <https://thechinaproject.com/2022/03/02/in-xinjiang-a-new-normal-under-a-new-chief-and-also-more-of-the-same/>

Reverberations of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Regional Stability in Asia



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SYNOPSIS

The Ukraine conflict has demonstrated that the interconnectedness of globalisation has also created global vulnerabilities. Decoupling from risk and doubling down on the principles of good governance to sustain regions of stability will be essential in the “age of uncertainty”.

COMMENTARY

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine sent shockwaves around the world. While the reverberations were keenly felt in Europe and NATO saw renewed support, recent altercations between Azerbaijan and Armenia highlight another side effect of the conflict: the deterioration of the Russian-led Eurasian regional architecture centred on the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). The war has hobbled Russia to such an extent that it can no longer effectively attend to other security issues in its backyard.

While observers in Asia wondered about the implications of this conflict for Sino-US tensions, the immediate consequence has been high inflation and recession risks as the war affected global supplies of oil, food and other scarce commodities. This crushed hopes that the end of the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic would see renewed growth and opening in the global economy.

FEVER OR BITTER PILL

One could draw a parallel between the consequences of the invasion and COVID-19. A human body’s response to viral infection is to generate a fever. Fevers, rather than being a cause of the problem, are the body’s natural response to attack the virus. Today, the world is suffering a “fever”, manifested in soaring production costs, which evoke memories of the stagflation crisis of the 1970s. This is discomfiting but a consequence of penalising military aggression, without which interstate aggression would be normalised, leading to far worse than a mere inflationary “fever”.

Tracing the root causes of disruptions to production is necessary to determine the cure, and where those causes are embedded in international or domestic disparities, then they need urgent policy attention, even if it is a bitter pill to swallow. Alleviating economic risks entails addressing the political fractures that predate the Russian invasion.

FRAGILE ORDERS AND FRACTURING INTERDEPENDENCE

The disruptions have been brought about in part by populism, which is frequently pinned down to growing inequalities in society and antipathy towards allegedly corrupt “elites”. And yet, as Schäfer and Zürn argue,¹ these do not explain everything: even democratic decision-making institutions, especially where they sit in distant structures of global governance, have been implicated by their remoteness from the people, and what began as dissatisfaction with circumstance has been amplified by populist leaders into wider distrust of regional and global institutions. Moreover, these discontents are represented by nation states in the international arena.

In the Ukraine crisis, this disparity is reflected in the difficulty in generating coalitions outside of the West. While Russia’s aggression is unacceptable, the ambivalence that rising powers such as Indonesia, India, South Africa and China have shown towards the Western reaction is telling: they have little faith in Western institutions and refuse to join up regardless of their own understanding of the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the non-use of force. Between the destabilisation of orders and the lack of global consensus on serious security challenges, the prospects then appear bleak.

Political scientists Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman have characterised as the “weaponisation of interdependence” the tendency of states to use (and abuse) their key positions in international networks to coerce other states at greater distances from the centres.² Increasingly, competition is taking the form of states occupying key nodes while trying to exclude others, as seen in their current focus on strategic industries such as microchips. As weaponising of interdependence intensifies, states have increasingly sought self-reliance, sometimes a component of supply chain resilience, to insulate themselves from political risk. This approach could provide a key step for dismantling the complex interdependence that was once heralded as the safeguard that rendered interstate conflict less likely.

CHALLENGES OF LEGITIMACY AND INTERDEPENDENCE

The twin problems of global institutions losing their legitimacy and interdependence being weaponised encapsulate the looming global challenge after the Ukraine conflict. The growing legitimacy crisis afflicting global institutions — one that has long been warned of³ — will hamper their effectiveness in addressing disruption in this age of uncertainty. This pessimism stems from the sobering reality that neither non-alignment⁴ nor reform of global institutions⁵ is likely to take place, even as international consensus becomes harder to achieve. IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva’s urgent call for stability in the global economy⁶ cannot be accomplished without stability in political institutions.

Countries will thus have to push through change in smaller subgroupings, where their initiatives may have a more limited reach. Yet such “minilaterals” must differentiate themselves from those that have been constructed to promote strategic rivalry. They should remain committed to strengthening the global commons and public goods in an inclusive and principled way. Yet they must leave behind the instability that rivalry and geostrategic competition bring. States are not incorrect in desiring to decouple themselves from political risks, the root cause of growing economic risks. Free market preferences for the lowest costs possible can generate dependency for a state, but it is difficult for individual firms to have this bird’s eye view of the political dimension of this problem. Trying to address this challenge will entail some “fever” because costs will rise. Yet this is not the entirety of the picture.

Some states have begun to attempt “friend-shoring”, a process of finding like-minded partners to deepen cooperation among those who do not accept the growing dichotomisation caused by rivalry. Economies characterised by good governance, meaning adherence to the rule of law, transparency, and accountability, are more likely to insulate markets from the political risks that result from geostrategic competition generated by rival powers.

Decoupling from political risks does not mean disconnecting from global nodes of production; instead, it entails paying closer attention to the principles of the economic order and the degree to which states conform (or not) to international rule of law to promote healthy, rules-based competition. However, the presence of rules is not enough: understanding other states’ susceptibility to domestic upheaval and thus the potential for major foreign policy shifts must also be part of the consideration.

This is a complex challenge because states with open access orders and free markets are not used to directing their firms on where to operate. But it is essential that they point them in safe directions as systems that are vulnerable to geopolitical disruption will entail significant risks, even as the lure of short-term benefits from cheaper prices remains.

CONSTRUCTING REGIONS OF STABILITY

In an era of disruption, stability commands a premium. At least one common interest that small groups of nations can converge upon is that of creating regions of stability. Such regions will require renewed diplomatic impetus, but recent successes in seeing through the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) amid geopolitical tensions and domestic populism justify optimism that such initiatives remain possible. Moreover, similar initiatives have successfully been pushed through in the past — during the period of norm setting in the middle of the Cold War, when ASEAN developed the first Bali Concord and treaties for amity and cooperation and nuclear weapons-free zones.

Regions of stability offer a different path for nations to buffer themselves from the uncertainties of superpower competition. While not global, they should avoid exclusivity yet be built on the firm principles of the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and standards to ensure level playing fields. These principles must be conditions of entry as well as for removal or sanction, but they should maintain the goal of bringing like-minded states on board. A rules-based framework may be hard to achieve, but it is the means to avoid path dependencies along superpower alignments.

The enduring impact of the war on Ukraine may be to recognise that as global interdependence loosens, states need ways to restore stable interactions with each other and avoid the severe risks that unabated rivalry brings. Rebuilding these fractured links more resiliently will be costly in the short run, but will, like a fever, be a necessary pain to prevent the complete unravelling of interdependence.

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For the essay on “Nuclear Security: Policy Implications for Singapore and ASEAN” by Dr Alvin Chew, please refer to **page 45** in the Annual Review.

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