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Ukraine and China in the Face of the Russian Invasion

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Since the outbreak of the war, Ukraine has been seeking greater involvement from China in resolving the conflict, hoping that this will stop Russian aggression. However, the Chinese government avoided direct contact with President Zelensky and spoke ambiguously about the causes of the war and Russia's actions. Taking advantage of the situation, they are buying cheap Russian hydrocarbons, and have developed economic cooperation with Russia, but decided not to support it militarily. Ukraine is cautious in criticizing China, being aware that a change in Chinese policy and open support of the Kremlin may change the course of the war in favour of the Russian Federation.

Ukraine towards China in the first months of the war. The new phase of Russian aggression against Ukraine after 24 February 2022, has significantly determined contemporary international relations. China is one of the states that want to take advantage of the situation to strengthen its international position at the expense of the West, but also of the Russian Federation, which has miscalculated by attacking Ukraine. From the perspective of Ukraine, two issues have been crucial since the beginning of the war; firstly, that the Chinese authorities are persuaded to put pressure on Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation to end the armed aggression and secondly, to lobby for China not to provide military aid to Russia. Although the Russian Federation officially claims that it did not seek such assistance from China, American intelligence sources have obtained information contradicting these statements.

The implementation of these principles was extremely difficult, as the Chinese government, led by Xi Jinping, avoided direct contact with the political leadership of Ukraine, choosing instead to observe the development of events. China's caution was partly a consequence of concerns about the unpredictable results of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, not only in economic but also in political terms. The West's unequivocal attitude towards Russia could also have resulted in a tightening of the policy of the United States and its allies towards China. Even before the outbreak of the war, the US authorities had repeatedly warned China of the economic consequences of a new war, to encourage the Chinese authorities to exert greater influence on Russia to stop its aggressive plans.

After the outbreak of the war, Ukraine adopted a very conservative and cautious position towards China, fearing it might decide to openly support Russia. It is worth emphasizing that after the beginning of the new phase of aggression, the Chinese authorities provided Ukraine with humanitarian aid, but at the same time dynamically developed economic and military cooperation with Russia. The United States has repeatedly warned China about the consequences of violating sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation.

So far, there is no conclusive evidence to confirm the information that China is providing military assistance to Russia. There are reports from the Ukrainian authorities about Chinese bulletproof vests, helmets, other defensive equipment, and civilian drones, but no Chinese weapons or ammunition have been found in the equipment of the Russian army.

From Ukraine's point of view, it is important that China appeals to Russia not only for a de-escalation of the war and the start of peace talks but also for greater restraint in threatening Ukraine and the West with nuclear weapons. On the other hand, Ukraine is fully aware that China has never directly condemned the Russian Federation for its aggression and has been ambiguous about the reasons for the outbreak of the war. They have also avoided consultations with the U.S. on Ukraine. On 24 May 2022, President Zelensky criticized this attitude



in his speech: "China currently occupies a position according to which the occupation of the territories of other countries is normal". Additionally, on 27 October, he stated that he would like China to stop manoeuvring in the matter of the war in Ukraine and send a clear signal to Russia because this would have a real impact on the course of the conflict.

Ukraine and the so-called China peace plan. A kind of breakthrough in China's attitude to the war was the so-called peace plan. It is worth noting that the Chinese proposals came at a time when the Russian army was facing serious difficulties in Ukraine. The occasion for this was 24 February this year, i.e., the anniversary of the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. China did not propose specific actions in the context of the war but formulated 12 general themes that should guide peace talks that would end the conflict. The Ukrainian authorities drew attention to the issue of respect for the sovereignty of states, also linking it with the issue of the inviolability of borders. There was also a positive opinion about the demand for a solution to the humanitarian crisis, the protection of civilians and prisoners of war, and the continuation of the Grain Deal and post-war reconstruction activities. In turn, the Russian Federation stressed that the postulated general conditions of the talks included an immediate ceasefire and the lifting of "unilateral sanctions".

The Chinese proposals had no real significance for the further course of the war, but they alarmed the United States and its allies. They feared that the Chinese demands could be the basis for forcing a more favourable end to the war for the Russian Federation, or that failure to comply with them would be used as a pretext to provide Russia with military support. Similar concerns have arisen in the context of Xi Jinping's planned visit to Moscow.

The visit, which took place from 20 to 22 March, was a significant Kremlin propaganda success, but it did not bring any significant changes. The Chinese leader did not decide to openly support the Russian Federation in the war against Ukraine. He also did not confirm his willingness to provide any military support, which the authorities of the Russian Federation had hoped for. Only a few minor economic agreements have been signed.

In official statements, the Ukrainian authorities declared that they hoped to exert pressure from China on Russia to end the war. However, the main concerns related to the visit focused on a possible radical change in China's policy towards Russia and eventual support for the Putin regime by the PRC. From this perspective, the Moscow summit was beneficial for Ukraine.

Ukrainian fears were also fuelled by statements from some Chinese diplomats; particularly controversial was the interview with the Chinese ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, who questioned the sovereignty of the post-Soviet states. This was met with a sharp response from the Baltic states and Ukraine. As a consequence, the Chinese authorities had to issue a denunciation. On 24 April, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said that Beijing recognized the sovereignty of the former republics of the Soviet Union.

Xi Jinping's conversation with Volodymyr Zelensky. On 26 April this year, a telephone conversation took place between the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky, and the leader of China, Xi Jinping. It was the first such conversation in more than 400 days, as mentioned above; the Chinese leader had avoided direct contact with the president of Ukraine. This conversation took place, among others, thanks to the efforts of French President Emmanuel Macron during his visit to China. Let us also add that since the emergence of the Chinese principle of ending the war in Ukraine, President Zelensky has also been looking for an opportunity to have such a conversation. The fact that China waited so long was humiliating for Ukraine.

The phone call lasted about one hour. We do not know its details, but the tone of comments from the Ukrainian side proves that it was successful. President Zelensky stressed that one of the main topics of the talks was to work out a just and stable peace. During the talks, China declared that it did not intend to "add fuel to the fire", which suggested that it had no intention of providing Russia with military aid. They also confirmed that they supported the Grain Deal.



Conclusions

- The Ukrainian authorities are aware that China's attitude towards Russian aggression against their country may change the course of the war. For this reason, they comment quite cautiously on China's policy towards Russia, in order not to give it the pretext to provide the Russian Federation with military support. These fears were visible after the announcement of the so-called peace plan. Their general and unclear nature created a large field for interpretation and manipulation for the Russian side, which was extremely unfavourable from the point of view of Ukraine.
- The Ukrainian authorities have no illusions that China's goal is to bring the war to an end as soon as possible to prevent a clear victory on either side. A Russian victory would mean a strengthening of its position in Central and Eastern Europe, while a victory for Ukraine would strengthen the international position of the West. The weakening of both sides has a deeper geostrategic sense and strengthens China's position in the international arena. In addition, the continuation of the war and its possible escalation would put China in an extremely embarrassing situation in the context of further support for the Russian Federation. It is no coincidence that the talks between the leaders of China and Ukraine took place on the eve of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- China's attitude towards Russia is not clear, which the Ukrainian authorities are fully aware of. On the one hand, China has significantly increased its purchases of Russian hydrocarbon resources and fertilizers (at attractive prices) and is developing economic and military cooperation, while on the other hand, it has consistently refused to provide military assistance to Russia. In the political sphere, too, there is no full compliance. The Chinese authorities have not recognized the annexation of Crimea and the south-eastern areas of Ukraine and, after the declarations of the Russian Federation about the planned deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus, indirect criticism was heard from China. It is also worth emphasizing that on 28 April, China voted in favour of the UN General Assembly resolution on cooperation between the UN and the Council of Europe, in which Russia was described as the aggressor.