

## War in Ukraine

# Xi pursues policy of 'pro-Russia neutrality' despite Ukraine war

Chinese president unlikely to abandon Vladimir Putin owing to mutual interest in opposing west



Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in Moscow. The warm rapport between the Chinese and Russian presidents has helped them build what some analysts call a 'personal alliance' © Getty Images

**Kathrin Hille** in Taipei FEBRUARY 26 2022

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As Russia's invasion of Ukraine has intensified, so have the rhetorical gymnastics of diplomats from the country's giant neighbour that is also one of its few large remaining international partners: China.

Their attempts to balance Beijing's policy of support for global peace and stability while avoiding any criticism of Moscow are a sign that the war is unlikely to derail China's [quasi-alliance](#) with Russia, diplomats and analysts said.

"The Chinese foreign ministry is doubling down on their alignment to Russia, so we are learning in real time what they mean when they say there are 'no limits' in their partnership," said Evan Medeiros, a China expert at Georgetown University and former senior Asia policy adviser to Barack Obama.

China's close ties with Russia theoretically created a "strategic trilemma" for Beijing, potentially clashing with its other foreign policy principles, such as protection of states' sovereignty, and with other important economic relationships with the US, Europe and elsewhere, he said.

"But they are clearly privileging their alignment with Russia and pursuing something I would call pro-Russia neutrality."

Beijing has been here before. Both in 2008, when Russia sent troops into Georgia,

and in 2014, when Moscow annexed [Crimea](#), Beijing avoided directly backing Russia's actions but also refused to criticise them.

“China and Russia handle their partnership on two levels. On one level is rather non-committal rhetoric about conflicts in each other's neighbourhoods, and on another is the strong alignment when it comes to great power competition,” said Alexander Korolev, a lecturer at the University of New South Wales who researches the China-Russia relationship.

“There is a stronger rhetorical support from China for Russia in its resistance against Nato expansion this time.”



A volunteer guards a main road leading into Kyiv © AFP via Getty Images

When Russian president Vladimir Putin visited Beijing for the Winter Olympics this month — he was one of the few foreign leaders to do so — Chinese president Xi Jinping threw his weight behind Putin's opposition against Nato expansion. On Friday, China abstained in a vote on a UN draft resolution condemning Russia's attack on Ukraine.

Some western analysts wonder, however, whether this time, by starting a war in Europe, Putin may be putting too great a strain on the partnership.

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Russia does have a penchant for destabilising actions, while China has this desire to rise to great power status on its reputation for prudence and stability,” Andrea Kendall-Taylor, senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and a former intelligence officer working on Russia, said at a [debate](#) this week.

She added this contradiction might introduce fissures in the relationship. “So far it has deepened without any side having to incur any cost for the other. That is going to be put to the test in this case,” she said.

Until the eve of the attack, Chinese state media was still [calling](#) US warnings of a Russian invasion disinformation. “It was a shock to wake up to [the invasion] because we still thought that he was bluffing,” a Chinese diplomat said, referring to Putin.

“There is an element of surprise in the expert community and among the public about the mode and scale of Russia’s action,” said Zhang Xin, a Russia expert at East China Normal University. “It is possible that more concrete information was exchanged between the two leaders.”

Zhang said it was “slightly embarrassing” for the government to reiterate principles, such as respect for territorial integrity, while accommodating Russia’s military action and also being at odds with Chinese interests such as the aim for common development and prosperity in Eurasia.

But this seemed to be a minor concern for Beijing. “No matter how much bloodshed we see in this conflict, unless it becomes an all-out regional war and great powers get pulled in, I don’t think it will have an impact on China’s bilateral ties with Russia,” Zhang said.

One reason is the personal stamp Putin and Xi have put on the relationship.

“There is definitely some personal rapport and chemistry between them, to the extent that you could almost speak of a personal alliance,” said Artyom Lukin, an associate professor at Far Eastern Federal University in Vladivostok, who believed Putin informed Xi of his plans.

“Putin is not completely mad — he must have understood that he needed support from China on this. Moreover, not informing Xi could have been a personal affront.”

Analysts also said Xi had shown a higher acceptance of risk and friction in foreign policy during his nearly nine years in office than his immediate predecessors, reflected in his pursuit of a more confrontational and assertive stance in disputes with neighbours. This made Putin’s actions more palatable to him.

[Sanctions](#) may be a more serious test. China is expected to offer Russia respite, for example by increasing commodities trade through state-owned policy banks that have less trouble circumventing US sanctions.

“Look to North Korea for reference: All trade with them is banned under international sanctions and yet China accounts for 95 per cent of their foreign trade,” Lukin said.

This week, China removed restrictions on imports of Russian grain, opening up another source of agricultural export revenues just as Moscow faced new western sanctions.

China’s foreign minister Wang Yi warned on Saturday that sanctions would not only hurt the economies of Moscow and the west but would also prevent a political resolution of the conflict.

“Sanctions won’t solve [old] problems,” said Wang in a phone call with Annalena Baerbock, his German counterpart. “They will create new ones.”

In Washington, policy experts therefore believe that only raising the cost of backing Russia could make China think again.

“I don’t think Beijing is terribly uncomfortable with Putin’s play. So if you want to change that calculus, you have to change the pay-off,” said Yun Sun, director of the China programme at the Stimson Centre.

“If Russia works with Chinese financiers, in order to block that channel, the US needs to increase the cost for China Eximbank and China Development Bank,” she added.

But for now, western governments have their hands full with responding to Russia’s invasion. “The Russia conversation is moving fast,” Medeiros said. “But the ‘what do we do about the Russia-China relationship’ conversation — it has started, but it has not reached terminal velocity.”

*With additional reporting by Sun Yu in Beijing*

