

War in Ukraine

Ukraine says China is ready to act as a peacemaker

Kyiv believes Beijing wants to stop the war with Russia but critics warn of a 'smokescreen'



Refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine arrive at a train station in Przemysl, Poland © AP

Edward White in Seoul 4 HOURS AGO

Stay across the latest Ukraine coverage

🔔 Get instant email alerts

✕

Ukraine's declaration that China had assured Kyiv it would help stop the war has renewed focus on Beijing's potential role in pressuring Russia to back down.

But China's public comments, the close [ties between presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin](#) and Beijing's lack of experience in resolving such disputes hint at the hurdles it will have to overcome to do so, said diplomats and analysts.

The debate over Beijing's [possible role](#) as a mediator intensified after Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Saturday that he had received assurances that "China is interested in stopping this war".

"Chinese diplomacy has sufficient tools to make a difference and we count that it is already involved . . . and that their efforts will be successful," he said.

Kuleba's [statements](#) followed a March 1 conversation with Wang Yi, China's foreign minister, and it is not clear whether they have spoken again.

Beijing has not elaborated on its [diplomatic efforts](#) and in a call with US secretary of state Antony Blinken on Saturday, Wang reiterated China's criticism of America, Nato and the EU for their role in "creating and exacerbating international tensions". The

and the EU for their role in “frictions and problems accumulated over the years”. The crisis could only be solved through dialogue and negotiations, he added.

Blinken told his Chinese counterpart that “the world is watching to see which nations stand up for the basic principles of freedom, self-determination and sovereignty”, said Ned Price, state department spokesperson.

Even as Ukraine appeared to push Beijing to become directly involved in brokering peace, some experts have questioned Beijing’s credibility and its willingness to take on a leading role in the conflict.

Paul Haenle, a former China adviser to US presidents George W Bush and Barack Obama, said Beijing might hope that appearing to support diplomatic efforts would “offset” the reputational damage it suffered from its strategic support for Russia.

“If you’re really aiming to have a positive impact you’ve got to do more than simply rhetorically calling for all sides to show restraint and to negotiate. I don’t think China is prepared to do that,” said Haenle, who was a US negotiator with China and Russia as part of North Korean nuclear talks.



Vladimir Putin ‘really has to rely on Xi Jinping’, says South Korea’s former foreign minister © REUTERS

“Will they roll their sleeves up and do the hard work that’s required? Will they shuttle between capitals? Will they send their officials into the war zone?”

But Song Min-soon, South Korea’s former foreign minister, did not rule out the

possibility that Xi would play a “constructive role”. He pointed to the economic and strategic influence China has over Russia and suggested the west should exploit Beijing’s self-interest in avoiding a prolonged crisis in Ukraine.

“Putin really has to rely on Xi Jinping . . . he has to listen to advice from Xi. If we do not have an alternative to China playing a brokering role, then why not?” said Song, who has also negotiated with China and Russia.

Several diplomats in Asia accepted that China might not be happy with the situation in Ukraine. But they also noted that the perception of China in many global capitals had deteriorated sharply in recent years, meaning Xi’s entreaties would be treated with caution.

“China doesn’t seem like a natural fit at all,” one diplomat said. “At the end of the day, Putin and Zelensky need to meet.”

China has abstained in two UN votes, including a security council resolution condemning the [invasion](#) and a call for Russia to withdraw its troops. Beijing has also criticised [international sanctions](#) imposed on Russia in an effort to punish Putin and cut the country off from the global financial system.

John Delury, a professor of Chinese studies at Yonsei University in Seoul, said that Beijing’s statements in support of negotiations “looks like [a] ‘smokescreen’ to provide cover for China”.

“They’re not in a neutral position. Given the gravity of Putin’s war of aggression, China would have to take much stronger steps against Russia before it would have any basic credibility to mediate,” he said. “They’re much closer to Russia.”

Putin and Xi announced a “no limits” partnership on the eve of the Beijing Winter Olympics and China backed Russia’s opposition to Nato expansion.

Since the start of the invasion, Beijing has [heavily censored](#) criticism of Russia and silenced pro-Ukrainian voices.

Chinese media cancelled English Premier League football broadcasts at the weekend over fears the Chinese audience would see international football players protesting against the war.

State media also refused to translate comments by Andrew Parsons, the International Paralympic Committee president, condemning the war at the Winter Paralympic opening ceremony in Beijing.

Additional reporting by Andrew Bounds in Brussels

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.
