

**War in Ukraine**

## **Russia's invasion of Ukraine sparks fierce debate in China**

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Experts and the public argue over the risks and benefits of Beijing's backing for Moscow

Kathrin Hille in Taipei YESTERDAY

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Chinese internet users called it a “proxy war”: three weeks ago, two pensioners in a Shanghai park got into a [fight](#) over the Ukraine conflict that left Russia-backing Shen Jianguo, 70, bleeding from the ear and trending on social media.

China’s government has leaned towards Russia by backing Moscow’s complaints about Nato expansion and refusing to call its actions an invasion. But while Beijing’s censors are working hard to suppress any criticism of that position, the conflict has ignited heated controversy both among Chinese policy experts and the public.

Analysts say the debate shows the strains caused by a clash between alignment with Russia and long-avowed Chinese diplomatic principles as Beijing struggles to assess how the war will affect its interests.

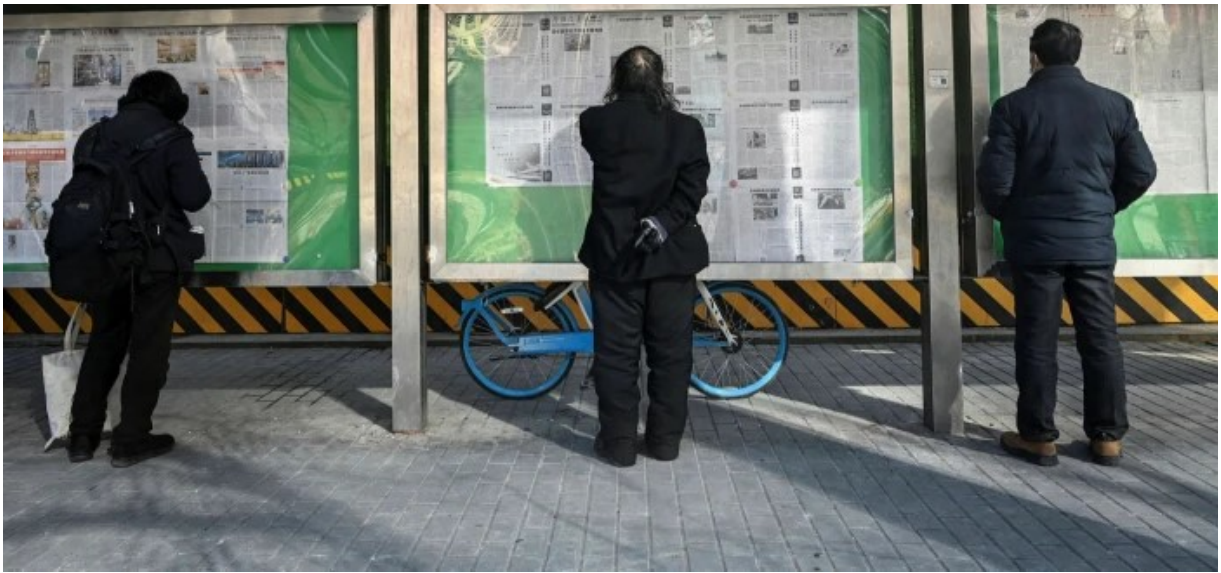
“The discussions are pretty intense. There are a lot of different points of view on this, the debate is extremely diverse,” said Zhao Tong, senior fellow at Carnegie Tsinghua Center in Beijing.

The fiercest arguments are raging about basic beliefs. “It is about right and wrong,” said Yun Sun, a China foreign policy expert at the Stimson Center in Washington. “I am struck by how intense the debate is, not just among policy folks, but also among ordinary people.”

Zhang Guihong, an international relations professor at Fudan University, said China needed to better balance its values and its interests.

“We have been leaning towards Russia. But there is a bottom line which we need to insist upon,” he said, citing respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, two principles China says guides its foreign policy.





People in Beijing read state-run newspaper coverage of the war in Ukraine © Jade Gao/AFP/Getty

“In international relations, there are two legal options to use force: one is a mandate from the UN Security Council, the other is self-defence,” Zhang added. “Although Russia felt threatened, for example by Nato expansion, that is a future threat, not a direct one that would justify self-defence.”

Five Chinese history professors have called on President Vladimir Putin to stop the war and [declared](#) sympathy with the Ukrainian people.

Separately, Hu Wei, vice-chair of a public policy research centre under China’s central government, [urged](#) an end to support for Russia. “Cutting off from Putin and giving up neutrality will help build China’s international image and ease its relations with the US and the west,” Hu wrote.

However, such voices are in the minority and are quickly silenced. After publishing Hu’s call, the website of the US-China Perception Monitor, a project promoting mutual understanding between the two countries, was fully [blocked in China](#) for the first time.

Mainstream scholars and opinion leaders see the war as a plot instigated by the US to weaken Russia, strengthen Nato and make Europe more dependent on Washington again.

“Some people in China continue to advocate for us to follow the west in condemning and sanctioning Russia,” [wrote](#) Hu Xijin, the firebrand nationalist former editor-in-chief of Global Times, the tabloid state newspaper. “Such propositions are very childish.”



Hu Xijin, former editor-in-chief of the Global Times, a Chinese newspaper © Gilles Sabrie/Bloomberg

Zuo Dapei, an economist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, [justified](#) Russia's actions as "righteous" because they were aimed against Nato. "We, the Chinese people, should voice the strongest call for justice on behalf of all the oppressed peoples in the world: Nato should be disbanded. Down with Nato!" he wrote last week.

Beyond the ideological divides, Chinese scholars are engaged in a sober discussion about how the Ukraine war affects their country. "For the Chinese it is simple: This is not Chinese territory, this is not a Chinese war," Sun said. "Everything on top of that is a cool calculation of what benefits or hurts China — it is a power-centric world view."

China Strategy think-tank, a website backed by Beijing scholars, argued that the conflict creates a strategic opportunity for China. "The longer the fighting drags on, the more it will exhaust Europe, America and Russia, and overall this benefits China," said the piece, which has since been taken down without explanation. Its authors argued that China should stand by and watch the war and could emerge as a mediator or even rulemaker in a new order.

Others focus on the economic impact. Some economists argue Russia's increased dependence on China due to international sanctions will make it a good source of

cheap supplies of commodities such as potash, coal or meat. But others express deep concern about the damage sanctions will do.

“There are a lot of worries about the economic fallout,” said Tuvia Gering, a researcher at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security who focuses on Chinese foreign and security policy. “China has a lot on its plate with a very ambitious growth target, Covid, climate and geopolitical competition.”

## Are you personally affected by the War in Ukraine? We want to hear from you



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The most hotly debated question is the long-term strategic outcome of the war. Some Chinese analysts are convinced that Europe, forced to increase defence spending, will evolve into a new geopolitical force more independent from the US. “There is the belief that in this situation Europe will need China more,” Zhao said. “I think it is a misjudgement.”

Chinese observers are equally divided on whether the war will preoccupy the US enough to undermine its efforts to counter China, or whether European countries' return to a more muscular security posture will free up resources for the US to pursue its pivot to the Indo-Pacific.

“China's assessment of the war is continuously evolving,” Zhao said. “People are realising that the impact will be profound and lasting.”

*Additional reporting by Maiqi Ding in*

*Beijing and Xueqiao Wang in Shanghai*

