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SCHOOL OF GLOBAL POLICY AND STRATEGY
21st Century China Center

STATEMENT

Hardheaded Diplomacy with China on Ukraine

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Vladimir Putin's brazen invasion of Ukraine has raised some difficult questions about the extent of China's support and how the U.S. should respond. Whatever Xi Jinping did or did not know about Putin's plans when they pledged a Sino-Russian friendship with "no limits" on Feb. 4, China's ongoing failure to condemn Russia's invasion is enabling its continuation.

China's convoluted rhetoric – noting its traditional support for sovereign borders, opposition to the use of armed force in international disputes, and diplomatic dialogue as the preferred means of addressing interstate crises – rings hollow while Beijing does little to censure Moscow's actions.

The furthest any Chinese official has yet gone was Foreign Minister Wang Yi's speech at the Munich Security Conference that defended "sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of all countries" and he subsequently told his Ukrainian counterpart in a phone call that China "deplores the outbreak of conflict between Russia and Ukraine." At a press conference a few days later Wang signaled China's tacit approval of what it calls Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine by proclaiming the PRC's relations with Russia to be "rock solid." China's response to Putin's aggression invites two views. The first view assumes that China has fully, and probably permanently, thrown itself into a de facto alliance with Russia. In this view, Beijing has concluded that it shares much more in common with Russia's anti-Western grievances and worldview than with the U.S.-led alliances.

From this standpoint, Beijing has thoroughly cast its lot in with Russia, not so much because the two governments share geopolitical interests as because they share a fundamental agreement of values and causes. In this view, a new era of great power rivalry is upon us. Europe has discovered a new awareness of the need for deterrence and collective defense. Since Washington judges the fault line between it and Beijing as already being unbridgeable, the best policy is to embark on a pressure campaign designed to impose high economic and reputational costs on China for its support of the Russian invasion.

The U.S. and its allies will proceed from the premise that you are either against Russia or you are for it, and that China has made its decision. In China's case, Deng Xiaoping's "hide and bide" strategy of restraint has now been irrevocably replaced by Xi's new strategy of assertive authoritarianism on the world stage, including explicit opposition to NATO and other U.S.-led alliances. China, in other words, will be in a broad anti-American alignment with Moscow, as its February joint statement with Russia publicly announced.

By contrast, a second viewpoint believes that China's alignment is not set in stone. There are significant ways in which China's long-term national interests are not, in fact, aligned with Russia's, and deft U.S. diplomacy might still be able to find ways to temper Beijing's alliance with Moscow. This perspective is based on the possibility that Xi was not expecting an all-out war and failed to anticipate Ukrainian resistance.

As fraught as things have become, it is still possible to find daylight between Beijing and Moscow. After all, despite Beijing's rhetorical support for Russia's "legitimate security concerns," Chinese banks and companies have not yet attempted to undermine international sanctions, albeit out of their own economic self-interest.

From this perspective, the right moves for Washington would be to:

- Seek to engage China diplomatically;
- Convey to Beijing that the U.S. and its allies are firmly resolved to isolate Russia economically until it deescalates;
- Suggest that action by Beijing to mitigate the effectiveness of sanctions against Russia will lead to substantial costs for the Chinese economy and growing isolation from and ostracism by the international community.
- Impress on Beijing that its long-term interests will not be best served by tying itself to a pariah reviled by most of the world, whose economy is less than one-tenth China's size that has also been cut off from the very international economic system on which China's future growth depends.

Even though most of us believe Putin and Xi share deeply held grievances against the West and liberal democracies that make it extremely unlikely either country will change course, we nonetheless urge keeping the door open to this second approach for the time being.

The following reasons recommend such a pragmatic posture:

First, at this juncture when the situation is fluid and evolving, Beijing is still in a state of some modest ambiguity. There is still a chance of influencing Xi's calculus. Diplomatic efforts could influence China's actions in ways that protect the people of Ukraine right now. The most important objective of the U.S. at this moment is to ensure that existing sanctions against Russia have maximum impact on Putin's strategic choices.

Consequently, our most important interest with respect to China is to prevent it from softening the impact of sanctions by providing work-arounds for Russia. So far, it appears that Beijing and most Chinese companies are complying with the new financial and trade sanctions, not because Beijing supports them, but because they view the potential cost of violating them to be higher than complying.

Even as Beijing rhetorically opposes international sanctions, American diplomats should continue their communications to encourage China's compliance, and make it clear that any efforts to undermine or evade them will be met with swift and costly penalties.

Second, support from Europe and parts of Asia for draconian economic sanctions on Russia has been strong, reflecting a collective recognition that Moscow's actions pose a direct, existential threat to the geopolitical and economic order that has enabled these countries to prosper peacefully over the past several decades.

Whatever Xi knew in advance of Putin's invasion, China has not itself been an aggressor in Ukraine and its public statements on the invasion have been equivocal. Thus, an aggressive campaign to create an equivalence between China and Russia would risk dividing the U.S. not only from China, but from our allies and partners at precisely the moment when unity and shared resolve are crucial to stemming Russian aggression.

Third, by using diplomatic outreach to Beijing, as the Biden Administration has been doing as this crisis has unfolded, the U.S. will be able to lay the groundwork for more effective pressure against China if Xi more openly supports Putin's brutal aggression.

American allies and partners will be more likely to support such pressure – despite their own commercial ties with China – if the U.S. can credibly show that it offered Beijing a reasonable approach that China rejected in favor of a more confrontational and destabilizing stance. Our principled efforts at diplomacy today can only enhance our moral authority tomorrow.

One of the most impressive reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been the solidarity of the U.S. and its allies, partners, and friends in defense of the common values and international law with respect to sovereignty, territorial integrity, self-determination and the peaceful resolution of international disputes. In any future competition with China over the direction of the international order, sustaining this moral solidarity among allies will be critically important.

For these reasons, we believe vigorous U.S. and European diplomacy, backed by the credible threat of stiff costs if China acts to mitigate the effectiveness of sanctions on Russia, is still the best way to proceed. This approach will keep pushing China to consider its own national interests, the costs it is prepared to bear, and how flexibly its leaders can adjust course to reduce the political consequences, economic burdens, and social ignominy of having Russia as its primary partner just as China seeks to take its place as a responsible great power on the world stage.

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About the Task Force and Past Reports

The Task Force on U.S.-China Policy is a group of China specialists from around the U.S., convened by Asia Society's [Center on U.S.-China Relations](#) and UC San Diego's [21st Century China Center](#) at the School of Global Policy and Strategy. It was established in Fall 2015, during an increasingly uncertain time surrounding the U.S.-China relationship.

The Task Force offered a set of recommendations to the incoming Trump Administration in its 2017 report, "[U.S. Policy Toward China: Recommendations for a New Administration](#)." A mid-term report in 2019 followed, entitled "[Course Correction: Toward an Effective and Sustainable China Policy](#)."

In addition to the above, the Task Force formed "working groups" with other organizations to produce three topical reports. In 2018, it published "[China's Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance](#)," that detailed the CCP's efforts to influence American institutions in improper ways. In 2020, it issued a report, "[Dealing with the Dragon: China as a Transatlantic Challenge](#)," that examined changing European attitudes towards relations with China. A second report, "[Meeting the China Challenge: A New American Strategy for Technology Competition](#)," followed in November 2020 and examined science and technology in the U.S.-China competition.