



**Clingendael**  
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## China is divided on Russia – let's keep it that way



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How will the war in Ukraine impact the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China?<sup>1</sup> US officials see the war as part of a broader confrontation between democracies and autocracies and lump China and Russia together. Others are much less outspoken. Much has been made of the Xi-Putin

statement on February 4<sup>th</sup>, giving rise to a new Axis-of-Evil narrative and concerns that China has chosen to side with Russia. But what is the Chinese narrative of Russia and the war? A review of Chinese statements shows a mixed picture. In this Alert, we examine Chinese statements made after the Russian invasion in Ukraine and assess what it tells us about possible Russian-Chinese cooperation.

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1 The authors are grateful to Frans-Paul van der Putten, Louise van Schaik and Rem Korteweg for reviewing this publication.

## What's China's Russia-story?

China's messaging on Russia's war in Ukraine oscillates between extremes:<sup>2</sup> one day Chinese diplomats say that Ukraine's sovereignty ought to be respected; the next, Chinese state media echo Russian disinformation on secret American biolabs in the country. Some see China as a potential mediator, citing one set of statements by Chinese officials, others portray China as a staunch ally of Russia, citing another set of statements. Can we count on China to ultimately back Russia in this war, or not?

Based on an analysis of public statements by government officials, state media and censorship policies since the invasion on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, this Clingendael Alert makes the case that China's divided economic interests towards Russia and its complex competition with the US show that its confused narratives regarding Russia's war in Ukraine accurately reflect conflicting interests. To frame China as having a fixed role in this conflict – either as a mediator or a Russian ally – would be a strategic mistake.

## Confused China: mapping the narratives

In spite of the pre-invasion declaration of friendship between China and Russia, the Chinese government has neither openly supported nor explicitly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine – but it has put out almost every signal in between. To make sense of China's conflicted messaging, we map its narrative attitudes on a scale from 'Openly Supporting Russia' to 'Explicitly Condemning Russia'.

The Chinese government has publicly responded to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in an ambiguous and hesitant manner. The bulk of the Chinese government's statements

should be seen as an attempt to appear neutral in this conflict.

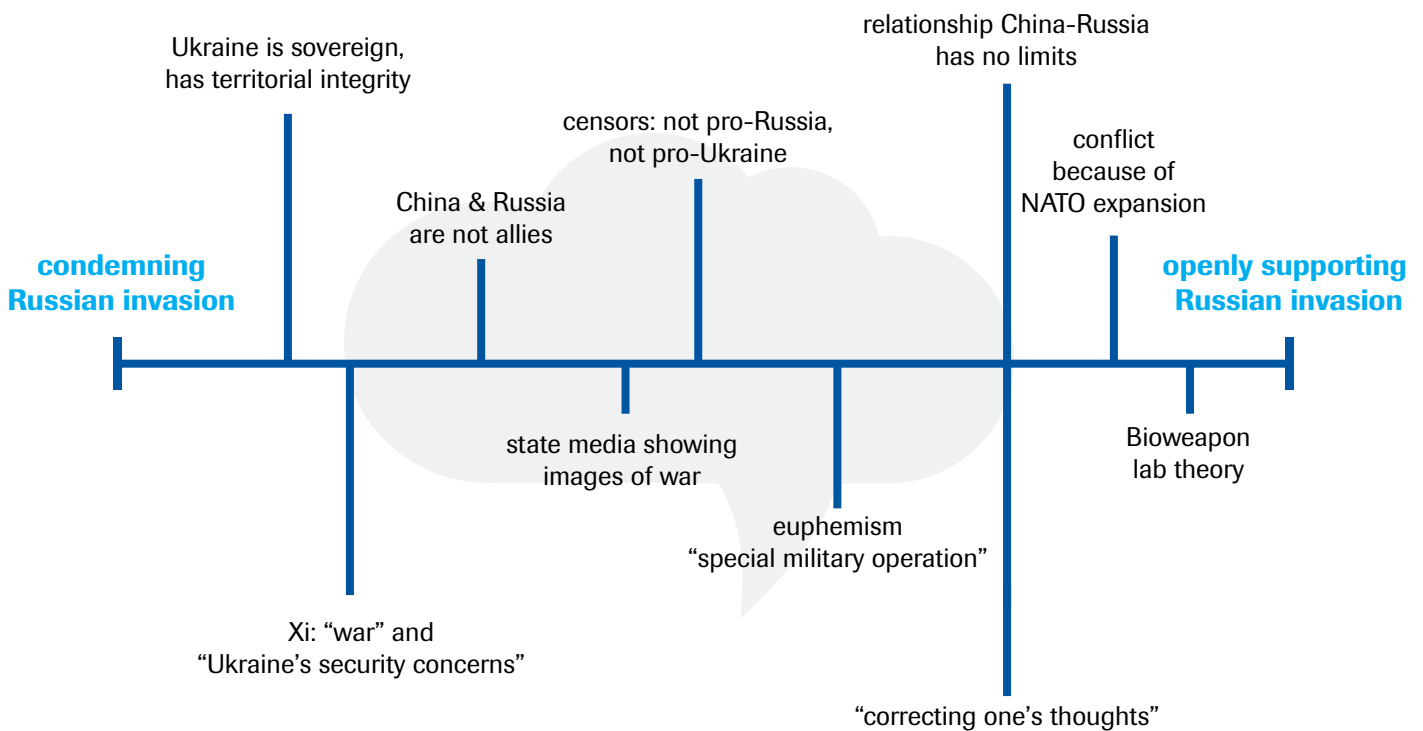
On February 28<sup>th</sup>, the Chinese Foreign Ministry [stated](#) that "All countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected and upheld and the purposes and principles of the UN Charter should be jointly safeguarded". This came in response to a question about Russian attacks on Ukrainian civilian targets. Was China signalling it did not agree with the Russian invasion? In the following press conference on March 1<sup>st</sup>, however, when asked whether this statement referred to Russia, the spokesperson [stated](#) again that one country's security cannot come at the expense of another's, and then said that due to NATO's enlargement, Russia has legitimate security demands.

On March 7<sup>th</sup>, Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi [announced](#) that China would provide humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, while at the same time stating that the friendship between the Chinese and Russian peoples is rock-solid. Statements by the Chinese Foreign Ministry's spokespersons make it clear that China neither condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, nor condoned it. The statements also avoided the words 'war' and 'invasion'. In the first days after the war started, the Chinese Foreign Ministry, aside from calling for peace negotiations, [stated](#) that Russia has legitimate security concerns that need to be taken into account. The Foreign Ministry's spokesperson also echoed Russia's excuse for the invasion, namely NATO expansion. Beijing even went as far as suggesting that the United States ultimately caused the war. At the same time, the Foreign Ministry has [made clear](#) that Russia and China are not allies, as is often suggested in Western media.

In Chinese state media there has not been as much focus on the invasion as in other countries' media. In the first few days after the start of the war, Ukraine did not make headlines but rather appeared as a sidestory. State media have used Russia's euphemism 'special military operations' to refer to the Russian attack, and generally do not condemn it. At the same time, the national broadcaster CCTV aired a sympathetic

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2 Disclaimer: the authors expressly do not believe that voicing support for Ukraine is an extreme stance, they merely argue it is so on the spectrum of Chinese narrative attitudes.



### China's narrative spectrum on Russia's war in Ukraine

interview with Ukrainian president Zelenskiy about his inability to see his family. On partially state-owned Phoenix news on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Chargé d'Affaires of the UK embassy in China [was interviewed](#) and her statements opposing the invasion and bombing of civilians were aired.

State media seem to mix both disinformation from Russian sources, as well as truthful coverage of Russian attacks on Ukrainian cities. That Chinese state media are not always entirely sure what the official line from Beijing will be, [became clear](#) even before the invasion, when Russia announced the recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk as independent republics. CCTV referred to the two regions in the way the Russian state did, calling them "Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic", but Xinhua wrote about "announcing recognition of two 'republics' in eastern Ukraine", presumably showing a lack of clarity among censors as to how to address the Russian line.

Despite the historical tendency towards narratives of non-alignment, Chinese spokespeople and state media at times escalate towards the extremes of the spectrum. They go both ways: toward, but

stopping short of explicitly criticizing Russia's invasion, and leaning toward, but stopping short of, blatantly picking Russia's side. Although it is difficult to objectively compare the volume and weight of these utterances, the spectrum does seem to skew towards 'Openly Supporting Russia', rather than towards 'Explicitly Condemning Russia'. We will go into some of the main points in the analysis below.

Statements that lean in the direction of criticizing Russia, should be seen as stronger expressions of China's historical propensity towards "non-interference". Examples of this are the words of the Chinese ambassador to the US, Qin Gang, who [wrote](#) in an op-ed in the Washington Post on March 15<sup>th</sup> that "the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, including Ukraine, must be respected", and statements made by the Chinese ambassador to the Netherlands, Tan Jian, who [said](#) that if China had known about the invasion beforehand, China would have tried to stop it. Chinese President Xi Jinping [expressed](#) his worry in a speech in early March by stating that China is "pained to see the flames of war reignited in Europe" and calling for "maximum restraint".



Interestingly, the most forceful pro-Russian statements made by Chinese officials are typically not in fact statements of support for Russia, but rather critiques of the US and NATO. In speeches, Chinese officials [name](#) NATO's 'eastward expansion' as the cause that lead to the invasion. Chinese state media also [repeat](#) Russian media narratives, including the conspiracy theory that US labs produce bioweapons in Ukraine. The hashtags "NATO also owes China a blood debt" and "NATO threatens world security" have both been censored from Weibo, but were initially allowed to trend by the authorities.<sup>3</sup>

Images depicting the massacre in Bucha in early April led to [a statement](#) on April 6<sup>th</sup> by the Chinese representative to the UN, Zhang Jun, who called the reports "very disturbing" but said that "all parties should exercise restraint and avoid groundless accusations until conclusions are drawn". Although the Chinese representative felt the necessity

3 Weibo post by China Daily on "NATO owes China a blood debt" / 北约欠中国一笔血债, automatically translated by Google Translate. <https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%25E5%258C%2597%25E7%25BA%25A6%25E6%25AC%25A0%25E4%25B8%25AD%25E5%259B%25BD%25E4%25B8%2580%25E7%25AC%2594%25E8%25A1%2580%25E5%2580%25BA?topnav=1&wvr=6&b=1>

to respond to the reports and state that civilians should not be a target, the Chinese statement clearly avoided blaming Russia, by calling for 'facts'.

Chinese narratives have not significantly changed over time as the war continued on. Interestingly, after Russia started to experience military difficulties, the Russian State Duma published a readout of a meeting on September 9<sup>th</sup> with Li Zhanshu, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. According to the Duma, Li [would have said that](#) "China understands and supports Russia on issues that represent its vital interests, in particular on the situation in Ukraine". However, the Chinese version of events reads rather differently. According to CCTV and Xinhua, Li never mentioned Ukraine. The only [statement](#) that he made regarding support for vital interests is: "China is willing to continue to work with Russia to firmly support each other on issues concerning each other's core interests and major concerns".<sup>4</sup> A video of Li's speech in the Duma surfaced later, and reveals that the Chinese communication towards Russia differs from the Chinese narrative presented to the rest of the world. Li's statements found

4 Translation of 中方愿继续同俄方一道, 在涉及彼此核心利益和重大关切问题上相互坚定支持

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in the Chinese readout, similarly to earlier statements made in the spring, stop short of publicly supporting Russia in the war.

### Conflicted China: division runs deep

What's behind China's muddled Russia-story? There are at least three structural factors that explain the conflicted messaging described above.

First of all, China has conflicting material interests in the Ukraine war. One of China's strongest interests is to maintain a good relationship with Russia. This has become even more important since the relationship between China and the US soured. This interest explains why the Chinese narrative is not one of condemnation of the invasion. But China also has interests in Ukraine and has enjoyed a good relationship with Kyiv. Those interests include investments, agricultural imports, defence imports and the role that Ukraine was able to play in the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly enabling rail freight transit towards the EU. Chinese material interests in Ukraine are actively being harmed by the current war.

Secondly, the war aggravates distrust of Russia in China. For decades, the Chinese government has invested in messaging that aligns its foreign policy with core principles of non-interference, non-alignment and territorial integrity. The importance of these principles has a clear historical component: the legacy of colonial conquest in China right through to the Cold War. Territorial disputes, cultural distrust and a history of Russia's interference in Chinese foreign policy, leave many within the Chinese political elite deeply distrustful of Russia as a partner. It facilitates mixed messaging.

Thirdly, to China, its interest in the war in Ukraine is mostly about competition with the US. This is expressed, for example, in the narrative that NATO/US provoked the Russian invasion. But that does not mean any enemy of China's enemy is China's friend; indeed, Russia has considerably complicated China's strategic competition with the US.

China's Europe policy promotes European "strategic autonomy", or at least a version of it that means more distance between Europe and the US. The Russian invasion, contrary to what China prefers, has created closer cooperation between Europe and the US, particularly on security issues. This therefore directly challenges China's longer-term ambition of a multipolar order in which Europe is more detached from the United States. China's fear that it will suffer in the slipstream of transatlantic coordination against Russia is real.

### China is divided on Russia: let's keep it that way

China is finding that being a great power is not easy: with global interests, maintaining a narrative of non-alignment and non-interference is nearly impossible. So where does that leave us?

Three key takeaways stand out:

China will not broker a peace – but it might side with Putin in the end. China would be very hard-pressed to actively get involved in the conflict in the way that Turkey's leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan has. Without a larger guarantee for success, China is unlikely to get involved as a mediator. Still, it might end up taking sides; under Xi Jinping, the geopolitical rivalry with the US trumps all other interests.

Nevertheless, it makes sense for Western policymakers to resist an Axis-of-Evil-narrative where China and Russia are lumped together. The extent to which the West can shape China's narrative on Ukraine is very limited; the Chinese state virtually controls all domestic messaging. It is able to filter information on, for instance, the brutality of Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Ironically, Western narratives of a Sino-Russian 'Axis-of-Evil' make it more likely the side of the Chinese elite that favours a hard confrontation with the US wins out. If the European interest is to prevent Chinese rhetorical and material support for Russia, downplaying messaging that emphasizes an

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inevitable conflict between autocracies and democracies, with China and Russia being natural allies, is key. In other words, let's not give China and Russia more reason to club together.

China will not be a mediator, but projecting narratives that emphasize China's responsibility for peace and non-intervention might make it harder for anti-Western voices within the Chinese foreign policy elite to prevail. This is particularly true

now that European countries show their willingness and ability to hit Russia hard with financial sanctions – a fate that the Chinese government is most eager to avoid.

All in all, it is not in Europe's interest to solve China's challenge of dealing with opposing interests in response to Russia's war in Ukraine, by framing China as Russia's natural ally. China is divided on Russia – let's keep it that way.

### About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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