

[H-Diplo Essay 421- Commentary Series on Putin's War: "War in Ukraine - A World Divided"](#)

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Commentary Series on Putin's War: "War in Ukraine - A World Divided"

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Introduction

The current war in Ukraine waged by Vladimir Putin's Russia has clearly transformed the world in the most unpredictable and dangerous of ways. Why President Putin launched his 'war of choice' in the first place when all the experts (though not the intelligence community) said he would not still remains something of a mystery, and no doubt historians will for years be trying to find out why.

But in the short term at least three things appear to have become clear.

The first is that the longer the Russian war machine fails to achieve its objective of defeating Ukraine in the time frame it originally planned for, its tactics are likely to become ever more brutal. The second is that we may well just be at the beginning of what could become an extended conflict between the West and Russia which might last for years. And the third is that in spite of doubts entertained all sides about how the West might, or might not, respond, thus far it has reacted with remarkable unity and determination. Thus the transatlantic relationship which was very much in doubt during the Trump administration now seems to be more resilient than ever. Germany has upped its game and increased military spending by several degrees. Meanwhile, public opinion in a number of countries has mobilized in a most remarkable way in support of that 'far away country' known as Ukraine, something that would have once been thought inconceivable.

Yet not all the world has been cheering on the West, supporting Ukraine, or openly condemning Putin. A number of African countries for instance (some dependent on Chinese largesse) have been decidedly cautious in expressing a view.^[1] Meanwhile, in large parts of Asia and the global South there is little consensus about who to blame for the war. As one BBC report put it, "India Pakistan, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Laos and Mongolia" actually "sat out the vote on a United Nations' resolution to demand the end of Russia's military operations in Ukraine."^[2] Another report coming

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out of India made it even clearer: Asia in general was not interested in the war.^[3] Finally in Russia itself, opinion (unsurprisingly) seems to be in favour of the war with something like a majority of Russians believing that the main culprit was not so much Putin – though there have been protests – but the ‘United States and other NATO countries.’^[4]

In what follows I focus in particular on the role played in all this by one very important state in the international system: China.^[5] As I show, having built what can only be described as a strong partnership with Russia over the past ten years – one often underestimated in some quarters in the West – it now finds itself in the enviable or unenviable position of having to back Russia in a bloody war aimed at a sovereign state when its most cherished principle is the defence of sovereignty.

But how did we arrive where we are today? Why did the original vision of a liberal order fail to realize its ambitions? How have two very distinct countries managed to build what even the Chinese now claim is more than just an alliance? And what is likely to come next?

Liberal Dreams

Two articles perhaps more than any other helped shape the debate about the nature of international politics after the Cold War: one authored by Harvard professor Samuel Huntington talked in almost apocalyptic terms of a coming “clash of civilizations,”^[6] the other, penned by Francis Fukuyama, spoke in far more optimistic terms of an “end of history.” To be fair to Fukuyama, he did not say the world was about to become some conflict-free zone. He merely suggested that there was no longer any serious alternative to liberalism. The long twentieth century marked by wars and revolutionary upheaval had at last come to an end. A less dangerous, and indeed less divided world, lay round the corner.^[7]

But how would once revisionist states fit into this new order? Fukuyama did not go into detail. However, the implication of his analysis was clear: those recalcitrants who had once stood outside the liberal order would have no alternative but to join the only ‘club’ in town. Nor were leaders like President Bill Clinton unaware of the opportunity this presented. Indeed, as the end of the Cold War gave way to the so-called ‘unipolar moment,’ the working assumption in Washington at least was that countries like China would over time become what US State Department official Robert Zoellick termed in 2005 ‘responsible stakeholders.’ This did not imply they would become democratic. On the other hand, it did suggest that as the material benefits of becoming participants in the world market became clear – China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 – these countries would in time develop a vested interest in maintaining the peace and playing by the rules.^[8]

It was not just China however that could look forward to a new relationship with the West. So too could post-Communist Russia. Putin might now have become the West’s favourite enemy. But it is worth recalling that for a few years at least – certainly up to the first Ukrainian crisis of 2014 – Russia appeared to be coming in from the cold. Thus it became the eighth member of the G7 in 1997 and

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remained inside the organization until 2014. Putin even made a state visit to Britain in 2003 where he made all sort of promises - which presumably he believed - of a new era in relations between the UK and Russia. A few years later Russia also signed a series of agreements with the United States covering a whole range of issues from arms control to trade and investment. Then, in 2012, Russia joined the WTO itself. It is easy now to brush all this aside, even to claim (as some have done) that the West was being taken in. But for a while it very much looked as if we were set for a new era of global cooperation.^[9][_____](#)

Realism Redux

There is by now an increasingly large literature which purports to explain why this new 'grand bargain' failed to materialize. The list of causes is almost endless.

Some of course blame western liberalism itself and its various efforts either to alter Russia or China from within - regime change by any other name - or of naively seeking to make one or both countries partners in a new world order. Indeed, according to one author, America's pursuit of a liberal agenda was not merely naïve but also made the US excessively belligerent, which in turn pushed Russia and China into a corner from which they are now very unlikely to return.^[10][_____](#)

NATO enlargement has also been held responsible in many quarters for precipitating the current crisis. This argument has attracted a wide range of support from large sections of the anti-American left through to the IR theorist John Mearsheimer,^[11][_____](#) and on to the one-time Ambassador to the former USSR, Jack Matlock who sincerely believes that a promise was made to Gorbachev back in 1990 not to enlarge NATO and that this promise was subsequently broken.^[12][_____](#)

Meanwhile, in the Indo-Pacific the responsibility for the deterioration in relations is either put at the door of China for acting in an ever more assertive fashion or - if you prefer to blame the US - of Washington refusing to recognize China as a true equal and moving away from a policy of engagement to one of containment.

Nor, finally, should we ignore the role played in all this by the assumption of power in both China and Russia of two highly authoritarian leaders determined to make their mark on history by standing up to a West which, significantly, both assumed to be in terminal decline. As Putin put it in 2018, and President Xi Jinping did not disagree, America's era of dominance was fast coming to an end. The unipolar order was "practically speaking already over." Like all empires, the American was now on the way down.^[13][_____](#)

Clash of Orders

Convincing though all these partial explanations might be (at least for those advancing them), singly or even collectively they all ignore what really lies at the heart of the new disorder: namely a 'clash' between two visions of how the international system should be organized, one promoted in the West in which nations would and should continue to play by western rules within an international system still dominated by the United States and the dollar, and the other, articulated by China and Russia

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over many years in various fora from the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which looked forward to a non-western, non-liberal order where the United States would no longer be the only serious player in the international system.

At what point Russia and China began to articulate this vision is open to some interpretation. The outlines of it can certainly be found as far back as 2009 at the first BRIC summit held in Russia. It took further shape after Xi came to power and began to insist that instead of China fitting into the pre-existing international system “the international system would and should accommodate” a “transformed China.”^[14] Following the first Ukraine crisis it took a sharper form still when China in effect threw in its lot with Russia. And it continued thereafter with a series of high-level meetings (37 in all between Xi and Putin), various discussions, and an almost endless number of communiqués which quite a lot of experts in the West either didn’t bother to read, or, if and when they did, regarded as being mere “hype.”^[15]

Yet hype is not a term that either Moscow or Beijing would have used to describe their relationship. Indeed, in 2021 - the year preceding the war in Ukraine - the relationship went from strength to strength. Thus trade hit a “record high”;^[16] in fact, by the end of the year, Russia had become China’s largest supplier of weapons and its second largest source of oil imports.^[17] In October China and Russia then held joint naval drills in the western pacific for the first time, and a month later conducted joint air patrols over the sea of Japan.^[18] Meantime, everything the US and the West were doing from creating the AUKUS pact through to Biden hosting the first in-person meeting of the Quad in September, only confirmed policy-makers in Moscow and Beijing that the West had by now become a permanent adversary driven by what China liked to call a “cold war mentality” married to “ideological prejudice.”^[19]

Little wonder therefore that as one year came to an end and another began, both China and Russia could confidently declare that their partnership was the “best” it had ever been in history.^[20] Indeed, so solid had it become that a few weeks later in early February, Xi and Putin met in Beijing and signed a lengthy document declaring that amongst other things they would oppose all those “actors” (a less than subtle reference to the United States) who in its view continued “to advocate unilateral approaches to addressing international issues” while interfering in “the internal affairs of other states.” Interestingly no mention was made of Ukraine. However, the document did refer to Taiwan. Here Russia reaffirmed “its support for the One-China principle” and confirmed “that Taiwan was an inalienable part of China” and that Russia - like China of course - would oppose “any forms of independence of Taiwan.” The message could not have been clearer. If or when China took whatever measures it deemed necessary to solve its Taiwan problem, Russia would stand beside it.^[21]

And So to War

As social scientists we are often told that getting the future right is almost as difficult as

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understanding the past. Even so, if the past history of serious strategic thinking pointed to anything, it was certainly not to a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, 2022.^[22] There were many good reasons to think this, but one clearly was the commonly held belief in the West that China, as the more cautious of the two powers, would do all in its power to dissuade Putin from launching his ‘war of choice.’ Then, having done what at least some in China must have thought seriously unwise (including a group of five historians),^[23] a whole host of western experts then hoped Beijing would use any influence it had to curb Putin’s ambitions. When this did not happen, they then took it in turns to point out how embarrassed China was with what was going on. Some in fact even implied that this might spell the end of the relationship altogether.

This view of China as urging restraint upon Putin before the war and acting as neutral mediator once it had begun – “China offers role as peace-maker” proclaimed the headline of the *Financial Times* on the 2nd of March – does not however sit easily with all the known facts. One can readily accept that the attack has put China in a most awkward position, more so than ever now that Putin has not achieved a quick victory. As the head of the CIA recently noted, “I think President Xi and the Chinese leadership are a little bit unsettled by what they’re seeing in Ukraine.”^[24] Perhaps so. But this has not persuaded China (so far) to do what many in the West have been urging it to do and criticize Russia or Putin.

On the contrary, at every turn, it has openly backed Russia. Xi may in his own words be “unsettled” by the war. He may have called for “maximum restraint” from both sides. He might be pained to see the “flames of war” being reignited in Europe. China has even declared that “Ukraine’s sovereignty and integrity must be protected” (though without mentioning the fact that it is Russia’s actions which have led to the opposite). Yet thus far China has shown no sign of either abandoning Russia or even stepping in to stop a war about which it may well have been informed was about to happen and was only delayed – at least according to some sources – to permit the Winter Olympics in Beijing to come to an end.^[25]

Indeed, far from attacking Russia, its main target throughout has been NATO and the United States for having pushed Russia-Ukrainian relations to the breaking point.^[26] Moreover, when asked to criticize Russian actions, the Chinese Foreign Minister responded by proclaiming that China’s friendship with Russia remained ‘rock solid’, and that however “sinister the international situation” might be, the two nations would continue to “push forward” its “comprehensive strategic partnership” forward into the “new era.” China certainly seems to have made good on this particular promise, to the extent of refusing to call Putin’s actions in Ukraine an ‘invasion’ while denouncing all those sanctions directed against Russia as being illegal. It has even gone as far as banning the showing of English Premier League football matches on Chinese TV just in case these revealed the widespread solidarity there was for Ukraine’s plight.^[27]

Futures

Making any prognoses in the midst of a fast-moving situation would be most foolhardy. But through

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the ‘fog’ of this particularly brutal war we can perhaps make a few, hopefully intelligent, guesses.

The first is that if the war continues - as it seems set to do in early March - then China is going to find itself in the increasingly uncomfortable position of having to support an ally and friend which in just under three weeks has become an international pariah. That said, there is nothing to imply, so far at least, that it will change course, however difficult maintaining that course might prove to be in the days and weeks ahead.

The second concerns the balance within the relationship itself. China may well be having to walk a tightrope between supporting a close ally who is waging a war while itself arguing in favour of peace. However, as a number of analysts have suggested, even if the war in Ukraine is posing a dilemma for China - possibly even a “severe test” according to Chatham House’s Yu Jie - over the longer term it may hope to reap its own rewards in terms of a Russia more dependent on China.^[28] Beijing may even be hoping that the more attention that the West continues to pay to what is going on in Europe, the less it will pay to what is happening in China’s own neighbourhood.

One thing though does seem reasonably clear. The terms of China’s relationship with Russia have probably changed for ever. This is unlikely to lead to a break with an ally whose view of the world is very similar to its own and whose support on nearly every international issue it values. That said, the calculation it now has to make about Russia is bound to have shifted. A strong and united Russia with stable economic relations with Europe might have been a friend worth cultivating. Having a state led by a reckless leader who talks glibly about nuclear war, and whose list of enemies now seems to encompass nearly all of the most advanced economies in the world, is going to be a very different proposition altogether.

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Notes

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[4] ___ See Mary Chesnut, "5 Polls that Contextualize the Russia-Ukraine Crisis," *Russia Matters*, February 17, 2022.

[5] ___ For background see my "'Not Just 'Convenient'; China and Russia's Strategic Partnership in the age of Geopolitics," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 1:4 (2016): 317-334.

[6] ___ Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72:3 (1993): 22-49.

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[10] ___ See for example Patrick Porter. *The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion and the Rise of Trump* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

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[13] ___ Patrick Reevel, "Russian President Vladimir Putin says US Dominance is Ending after Mistakes 'Typical of an Empire'," *ABC News*, 19 October 2018.

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[19] Helen Davidson and Gavin Blair, "China warns US-UK-Australia pact could hurt their interests," *The Guardian*, 16 September 2021.

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