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In the shadow of the Russian revolution: Putin, Xi and the long war in Ukraine

Michael Cox

On 24th February Putin launched what he hoped would be a brief intervention in Ukraine that would in effect lead to Ukraine becoming part of Russia. His short war however has turned into a long, costly military operation, that has left Ukraine devastated, pushed the world economy nearer to a generalized downturn, led unexpectedly to a major boost for NATO, and against Putin's own expectations, caused a crisis in Russia itself. In this article the author discusses the complex set of reasons why Putin decided to invade Ukraine and the many miscalculations he has made, before going on to criticize those western critics who insist that Putin's actions should be regarded primarily as an understandable, albeit unjustified, reaction to western policies. The article does not deny a role in all this for the West, but suggests that Putin should be allowed a high degree of agency in making the decision to go to war. Thus exploring his ideas and the Russian regime which he has created is crucial. The article then goes on to deal with the complex role played by Xi Jinping and China in a war to which it claims it is 'not' even 'a party', but in which it has played an important role supporting Russia while all the time claiming it upholds Ukrainian sovereignty. The article ends with an explanation of why China has stood by Putin, and why in spite of the very real costs incurred in doing so, it will more than likely continue to back Russia.

Keywords: Putin; Xi Jinping; Ukraine; Russia; China; war

Putin's war

There is still little agreement about why against most expectations, and possibly a good deal of military advice too, Putin still went ahead and invaded Ukraine on 24th February 2022. There is however a high degree of consensus that the war he

launched has not only failed to achieve its immediate objectives, but that the longer it has gone on the more destabilizing its impact has been on Europe, the global economy and Russia too. Putin decided upon war for many reasons, but one presumably was to unite all Russians around the flag. But with the costs of the war escalating in terms of casualties—an estimated 60,000 by August—and sanctions shutting the door on a wide range of technologies and goods from the West, that first patriotic wave of support (no doubt reinforced by fear and propaganda) now appears to be waning.¹ The Russian economy is hardly on the point of collapse. Indeed, with energy prices rising, it now has more surplus than ever before. Nonetheless, with GDP falling and the war showing no signs of ending any time soon, the future is beginning to look a good deal more uncertain.²

But it is the televised disaster that has been visited upon Ukraine that has brought home to the world the meaning of war in the modern age. The statistics alone convey only a small part of the catastrophe of what has unfolded since Putin made his fateful and fatal decision to send in around 150,000 troops to subdue Ukraine: 6 million citizens forced to become refugees permanent or otherwise, 7 million people displaced internally, thousands of deaths and injuries of civilians, the mass destruction of schools, bridges, hospitals and other infrastructure, strong evidence of the use of torture according to the UN, an untold number of Ukrainians held incommunicado in Russia, and if and when the war ends, a massive reconstruction bill of close to \$400bn to help put Ukraine back on its feet again. Nothing like this has been witnessed in over a generation, except perhaps in Syria from which Russia appears to have drawn significant military lessons which are now being ruthlessly applied to the cities and towns of Ukraine itself.³

Like any great shock to the system, the war has inevitably changed the way in which many people now think about the world around them. It has certainly delivered yet another blow to any liberal optimism there may once have been about the international system becoming less anarchic. It has also brought together some very strange bedfellows with on the one side writers on international relations like John Mearsheimer, critics like Noam Chomsky, the economist Jeffrey Sachs, and even Pink Floyd's Roger Waters effectively holding the US and NATO responsible for having precipitated the conflict, and others—largely but not only on the conservative right—insisting that the West should have seen all this coming a long time ago when Putin announced in 2007 that he would no longer accept a unipolar world in which in his own words, there was 'only one master and one sovereign'.⁴

¹ Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov, 'My Country Right or Wrong: Russian Public Opinion on Ukraine', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 7 September 2022.

² Figures for GDP taken from *Interfax*, Moscow, 26 July 2022.

³ Morgan A. Stewart, 'What Can the Syrian War Tell Us About the War in Ukraine?', *Middle East Institute*, 12 April 2022.

⁴ Vladimir Putin, 'Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy', 10 February 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/copy/24034>.

The war has also sharply divided the world with most countries in the Global North more or less accepting that Russia is the aggressor, but many in the Global South—mainly because they do ‘not consider’ a ‘crisis in Europe as being an ‘existential test for them’⁵—either adopting a neutral position, or in some cases with memories of the Cold War still fresh in their minds, tending to look more favourably on their old ally Russia than the United States. This is certainly what struck President Macron when speaking at a conference to discuss the future of democracy in September. As he pointed out, and few in the audience disagreed, ‘demographically speaking’ a majority of people in the less developed parts of the world were not standing with the West over Ukraine. This may have been unfortunate for the West and a tragedy for Ukraine, But as he went on to suggest, non-alignment in what was once called the ‘Third World’ was still alive and well.⁶

Even so, whatever reservations many may have reasonably had or have about the West or America’s role in the world, one still might have hoped that many more on what might loosely be defined as the ‘anti-imperialist left’—an imprecise designation to be sure—would have taken a more critical view concerning the deeper causes of the invasion. It is easy enough to find fault with western policies towards Russia over the last few years. But this tells us little or nothing about why Putin attacked Ukraine in the first place. It also runs the very real risk of not discussing the regime involved in the attack. After all, the invasion was hardly launched because NATO was about to invade Russia, in spite of Putin’s claims as early as 2021 that it was planning to do so. Rather it occurred because an extremely ruthless autocrat with a long career in the security services who had never come to terms with the collapse of the USSR and Russia’s diminished status in the world, decided to eliminate the imperfect but functioning democracy that was Ukraine and thus remove an important political thorn in his side.⁷ It also takes little imagination to infer that by doing so he was not only sending out a message to Russians and those in Russia’s ‘near abroad’ so-called that the regime would brook no opposition to its rule; he was also sending out an even clearer message to the rest of the world that Russia remained a great power with the capacity to behave badly and madly if and when it chose it do so.

Putin moreover was driven by a set of very distinct ideas about Russia, none especially liberal or even democratic or acceptable to the left in any shape or form. Certainly, his intellectual influences should have given those who thought his actions justified, some food for thought given that they included the anti-semitic Lev Gumilev who believed in Russian greatness and uniqueness, and Ivan Ilyin who argued that historic Russia had never been part of a ‘West’ whose goal he claimed was to destroy and dismember Russia. Putin’s reading of Russian history

⁵ Rana Mitter, ‘China-Russian Relations Carry Deep Memories of Mutual Respect ... and Scorn’, *The Guardian*, 27 March 2022.

⁶ Quoted in Roger Cohen, ‘A Time of Unease for Democracy’, *The New York Times*, 7 October 2022.

⁷ See ‘Report on the Human Rights Situation in the European Union’, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, Moscow 2013.

was even more bizarre commemorating as he seemed to the roles played by White generals Denikin and Kolchak who fought with great savagery against the revolutionaries during the Russian Civil War.⁸ Nor should we forget some of Putin's other Russian heroes, including most importantly Peter the Great, who like Putin himself (at least according to Putin) was compelled to fight a war against the Swedes in order to retrieve territory that really belonged to Russia.⁹

Little of this however figures in much of the critical western discourse about the war. Of course, the majority of socialists including those in Russia itself, oppose Putin and his invasion. Still, there remains a vocal group in the West who argue that even if they are not in favour of the war as such, still insist that his actions have to be explained and contextualized, not by reference to his ideas (which also include for good measure the notion that there is no such thing as Ukraine)¹⁰ but as a reaction to what the West and the US did, or did not, do following the USSR's collapse. The list of political sins committed is almost endless. However, amongst those most cited was the West's abject failure to provide economic aid to Russia when it was in transition, then going on to organize a right-wing coup in Ukraine in 2014, and finally (and above all else) lying about NATO expansion and then bringing NATO right up to the border of Ukraine with the door left open for it to join. One or two pundits have even insisted that Washington might have even welcomed the war as a way of drawing Russia into a costly war that would one day end in regime change in Russia itself.¹¹

Few of course would doubt that NATO has played a background role in setting the stage for the war, though more it would seem in terms of providing Putin with a cover story for his actions than anything else. Nor should we be insensitive to the disaster that befell ordinary Russians in the 1990s. Indeed, nobody with half a wit looking back on that sad decade can conclude that things could not have been done differently. None of this however gets anywhere close to explaining why Putin set about trying to destroy Ukraine—which was years off joining NATO anyway—or why his military have acted with such brutality since the invasion began. Indeed, by focusing largely on how the West itself precipitated the war and not on the kind of regime Putin has created in Russia since 2000, critics also manage to ignore something of possibly even greater historic significance: namely his determination to sever the final link his Russia might have with the Russian revolution, one of whose policies in the 1920s was to allow

⁸ In 2005 Putin reportedly 'arranged to bring back from the United States the remains of General Anton Denikin, the commander of the White armies in southern Russia and Ukraine', and then three years later, gave 'his blessing to a lavish biographical feature film' being made of 'Admiral Kolchak' one of the best-known leaders of the White Army after 1917. See Adam Hochschild, 'Why Putin Made Peace With the Soviets' Archenemies', *The Atlantic*, 7 October 2022.

⁹ Andrew Roth, 'Putin Compares Himself to Peter the Great in Quest to Take Back Russian Lands', *The Guardian*, 10 June 2022.

¹⁰ Article by Vladimir Putin, 'On the Historic Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', *President of Russia*, 12 July 2021.

¹¹ Robert H. Wade, 'Why the US and NATO May Have Long Wanted Russia to Attack Ukraine', *Global Policy*, 30 March 2022.

Ukraine the political space it needed to flourish as a nation. Indeed, as he himself has admitted in one of his many odd excursions into Russian history, the trouble did not begin when Ukraine voted by a massive majority in 1991 for independence, but rather when Lenin mistakenly endowed Ukraine with a sense of statehood by allowing it autonomy within the newly created Soviet state. Viewed from this wider perspective, Putin's war against Ukrainian independence is as much a war against the shadow still cast by the Russian revolution as it is against Ukraine itself.

But what of the other actor in these appalling events whose origins can also be traced back to the Russian revolution—the People's Republic of China? Putin may have rejected 1917 and all its works. However, this is not the case with the Chinese Communist Party which did after all build a new statue to Marx in 2018 in his birthplace in Germany, talks in almost awed reverence about 1917, and in formal terms at least remains wedded to Marxism-Leninism, albeit a form of it with distinctly Chinese characteristics. Yet in spite of these differences, China not only decided to form a very special relationship with Russia following the collapse of the USSR, but invested a huge amount of political capital thereafter—so much so that by early 2022 it was talking of having established a partnership 'without limits' uniting China and Russia together in opposition to western ideas of democracy, America as the leading power and a decaying liberal order that was bound in time to be superseded in a new era shaped by a new set powers, very much like Russia and China. Even Xi and Putin's views about Soviet history appeared to coincide on some key questions. Thus both admired Stalin, had nothing but the utmost contempt for that westernizing reformer Gorbachev, and of course viewed the collapse of the USSR with the same admixture of horror and incredulity.¹²

If nothing else, the close relationship between the two countries—like 'teeth and lips' declared one Chinese official¹³ and 'better than an alliance' claimed a Russian ambassador a few years later¹⁴—has certainly paid dividends for Putin throughout a war which China still refuses to call a 'war' and whose deeper causes it insists have to be looked for in the machinations of policy-makers in Washington and Brussels rather than in Moscow. Yet as we know, the war has not exactly gone to plan, and as a result by September and October was putting what many regarded as an enormous strain on the relationship.¹⁵ But before going on to discuss how much of strain, it would be useful first to explain why the war has gone so badly for Russia, how its most recent setbacks on the battlefield have impacted on the world, and why these setbacks are now causing a deep crisis in Russia itself. We will then

¹² Rebecca Armitage, 'China Studies the Soviet Collapse and Learned Three Lessons to Avoid a Similar Fate', *ABC News*, 25 December 2021.

¹³ Yury Tatrovsky, 'Russia and China: "Together Like Teeth And Lips"', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 8 September 2014.

¹⁴ Teddy Ng, 'Russia's Relationship with Russia is Better Than an Alliance, Says Ambassador', *South China Morning Post*, 2 June 2022.

¹⁵ 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on September 26 2022', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*.

return to China and explain why, in spite of the many predictions made by a large swathe of analysts Xi has persisted in backing Putin.

Clausewitz or Putin?

Wars not only have complex origins but over the centuries have thrown up their fair share of brilliant strategists, one of the greatest of course being Clausewitz who has probably bequeathed to later generations possibly more quotable quotes than any other writer in modern history. We all know (or should) his famous aphorism that ‘war is the continuation of politics by other means’. We may even recall his definition of war as being an attempt by one side to impose its will on the other by force of arms. But how many of us ever remember what he said about simplicity: that ‘everything in war is very simple’ until, inevitably, it becomes ‘difficult’. It is a great pity that Putin did not read these words of warning. Indeed, so fixated did he seem to be on studying (and mainly misunderstanding) Russian imperial history, that it is unlikely that he would have thought it worth his while looking at what a mere Prussian had said on the subject. But he would at least have learned one thing, that launching a war may look easy enough—as Clausewitz pointed out—but waging and then winning it is a different proposition altogether.¹⁶

Of course, in Putin’s case, winning in Ukraine was made nigh impossible by him committing a series of mistakes in his poorly conceived and badly executed invasion based on poor information generated by a dysfunctional system which for many years rewarded obedience to the top man rather than sound advice. Speaking truth to power in the court of Vladimir Putin was not something that was ever encouraged. Hardly surprising to discover therefore that this has led to what one writer has aptly termed a great deal of ‘magical thinking’ inside the Kremlin.¹⁷ Hardly surprising to discover either that Putin went on to make one error after another, the most egregious being to underestimate Ukraine itself which he thought would succumb to Russian power within a month or so, then Ukraine’s President turned war hero whom he assumed would either be assassinated or flee to sanctuary in the West, and finally the West itself, which instead of retreating, as he believed this declining, decadent, poorly led entity was bound to, did quite the opposite. There is, as we know, a very large academic literature on ‘intelligence failures’ and their consequences. Putin’s will surely be listed right at the top when studies on his particular war of choice is written about by future historians.

Indeed, possibly the best measure of his failure was that when the war began NATO only had 30 members (with little chance ironically of Ukraine becoming

¹⁶ See Jim Holmes, ‘What Would Clausewitz Say About Putin’s War on Ukraine?’, *U.S. Naval Institute*, Vol. 148, March 2022.

¹⁷ Katie Stallard, ‘Vladimir Putin’s Fatal Flaw: He Cannot Accept Defeat’, *The New Statesman*, 23–29 September 2022.

one of them any time soon)¹⁸ but a few months later looked as if it might be acquiring two more. Sweden and Finland could hardly be described as superpowers. Nonetheless, together they could lay claim to some serious ‘state-of-the-art military hardware’, a combined military budget somewhere close to \$14bn, and in Finland’s case an 800-mile border with Russia itself.¹⁹ This of course was not how things were supposed to turn out in a war that few—with perhaps the exception of the CIA and their British counterparts—ever thought would happen in the first place. Nor if we are to believe what was being said at the time, did the Chinese themselves who in public at least refused to accept what the Americans were telling them: that Russia was indeed planning to invade Ukraine and that they ought to be aware of the fact!

However, months after Russia had decided to do what most experts and most governments predicted it would not, all the indications are that the balance on the battlefield at last appears to have shifted Ukraine’s way. Indeed, after a period of stalemate its forces have gone on to score a series of successes—first hitting Russian logistics and bases including in Crimea, then in September forcing the Russians out of large swathes of north-eastern Ukraine and parts of the south and east, and finally (and most dramatically) in October seeing parts of the Kerch bridge linking Crimea to Russia collapse into the sea. The war which Putin calculated would be over in a matter of weeks with of course most Ukrainians welcoming their liberation from the depredations of a Nazi regime, looked like continuing for some time to come.²⁰

International reactions

Many factors explain Ukraine’s more recent successes. Amongst those more regularly mentioned by professional strategists are superior Ukrainian tactics, a high degree of Ukrainian morale (what Clausewitz called the ‘moral factor’ in war), deep deficiencies on the Russian side whose ill-equipped, poorly led army has displayed little stomach for a fight, and of course a massive improvement in the type of weaponry—mainly but not only American—now available to the Ukrainian military. No weapon system alone can act as some kind of silver bullet. But the quantity and quality of military assistance provided has clearly helped level up what at the start of the war was a very uneven ‘playing field’.²¹ To all this should be added one other, perhaps more decisive factor: that when countries are invaded by what most of their citizens regard as a brutal invading army then their propensity to resist is bound to be extremely high.

¹⁸ On Tuesday 15 March 2022, President Zelensky conceded that Ukraine ‘may never become a member of NATO’. See Joe Sommerlad, ‘Why Can’t Ukraine Join NATO?’, *The Independent*, 18 March 2022. For background see also ‘NATO Won’t let Ukraine Join Soon – Here’s Why’, *The New York Times*, 16 March 2022.

¹⁹ See Joel Hickman, ‘Why Finland and Sweden’s Accession Is a Game-Changer for NATO’, *CEPA*, 28 June 2022.

²⁰ ‘Why is Putin Calling the Ukrainian Government a Bunch of Nazis?’, *ADL*, 3 April 2022.

²¹ Between January and August 2022 the US provided more arms and assistance to Ukraine than the next eight NATO countries combined together. See David Brown, Jake Horton and Turel Ahmedzade, ‘Ukraine Weapons: What Military Equipment is the World Giving?’, *BBC News*, 9 September 2022.

But it has not just been Ukraine's proven capacity to resist that has proved decisive; of equal significance has been the impact its continued resistance has had on the world beyond. No doubt if Ukraine had gone under in a short time as most experts predicted, then a new status quo may have been established in which many countries (including those in Europe dependent on Russian energy) may well have acquiesced. Even the US was at first hesitant fearing that the war would spill over into NATO. However, the longer the war went on, the more western countries fell in behind Ukraine, while even those who had earlier been 'neutral' started to waiver somewhat. Take India. Before things started to change on the battlefield, it had displayed a marked reluctance to criticize its most important weapons supplier back in Moscow. Yet after several months of studied ambiguity in which it had refused to take sides, the Indian Prime Minister was at last moved to tell Putin that 'today's era is not' one 'of war'. Significantly, New Delhi then went on to vote in the UN to allow the Ukrainian president to address the General Assembly, a decision vetoed by Russia of course and in which China, unsurprisingly, decided to abstain.²²

Even the new British Prime Minister Liz Truss seized the moment to make her own very special intervention. Never one for flights of Shakespearean rhetoric, Truss's first speech to the UN was full of fire and brimstone. Peace certainly did not figure much in her vocabulary. Indeed, far from calling for a ceasefire, she not only demanded a toughening of the West's response to Russia's invasion, but appeared to be positioning the UK at the head of a wider coalition of the democracies who were now facing, and would in time overcome, the broader challenge posed by 'autocracies' in what she called the 'new era' of increasingly competitive 'geopolitics'.²³

Not everybody however shared Truss's desire to increase pressure on Russia. Right across Europe in fact there were rather more cautious views expressed by a number of leaders, many of whom insisted that now was not the time to pile the pressure on a wounded nation, but instead bring this unfortunate conflict to an end before it moved to another, even more dangerous level. A move towards some kind of deal might even persuade Putin to start sending that much needed Russian gas through that most famous of pipe-lines. Even so, with or without a continuation of the war, Europe (with one or two notable exceptions like Hungary) did not appear much inclined to help pull Putin out of the hole which he had dug for himself. Indeed, not only did the EU decide to increase sanctions on Russia in September. In Germany too attitudes were hardening. As *The Economist* noted a 'new' Germany was emerging, and even illustrated the point by showing a cracking egg on its cover out of which was emerging something very much resembling a baby eagle, sharp in tooth and probably even sharper in claw.²⁴

²² Samit Ganguly, 'Why Did Modi Push Back on Putin?', *Foreign Policy*, 22 September 2022.

²³ For the full text of the Truss speech see 'Prime Minister Liz Truss's Speech to the UN General Assembly, 21 September 2022', *Gov.UK*, 22 September 2022.

²⁴ 'Thanks to Vladimir Putin, Germany has Woken Up', *The Economist*, 11 August 2022.

Russia under siege

But it was in Russia that the impact of Ukrainian military successes was most keenly felt. Here an increasingly beleaguered Putin—shown by one UK magazine looking like a cornered rat²⁵—immediately called for a mass mobilization of ‘reservists’ and then, as if to prove his serious intent, threatened the West once more with nuclear weapons, emphasizing to those who thought he might be bluffing that this indeed was no ‘bluff’ at all.²⁶ Meanwhile, in a rare speech to the nation which included the by now standard reference to the West seeking to ‘weaken, divide and finally destroy’ Russia,²⁷ he confirmed that he was planning to annex ‘four partly occupied regions of southern and eastern Ukraine’ and legitimize their new political status through the well tested means of a referendum which would no doubt come up with the correct political result.

Even analysts who had in the past been more understanding of Russia’s position without necessarily backing the war itself, appear to have seen the writing on the wall for Putin. With discontent on the rise in a country where opposition to the war could earn you 15 years in prison for spreading ‘fake news’, this was really quite a remarkable development. Equally revealing (if true) were well-founded rumours based on western intelligence intercepts that the Russian military was now arguing amongst itself about ‘where to focus their efforts to shore up defensive lines’ in Ukraine.²⁸ Meanwhile in Russia itself a combination of popular mass protests against conscription, and the ‘huge increase in people trying to leave Russia’, not only indicated that cracks were beginning to appear on the home front, but that Putin was at last coming to recognize the extent of ‘Russia’s strategic failure’ in Ukraine. In fact, so desperate was the situation according to Anatol Lieven, that Russia might now be ready for negotiations, as long as they achieved ‘at least some of the Kremlin’s initial goals’.²⁹

This though was not a view shared by many pundits. Nor more importantly did it appear to be Putin’s position either. With a quarter of a million Russians now trying to get out of the country, attacks reported on recruiting stations in at least a dozen cities, and a wave of demonstrations sweeping those ethnic areas where many people thought Moscow was ‘disproportionately targeting ethnic minorities and people from Russia’s poorest regions’,³⁰ Putin did what he had always done before when under siege: he ‘upped the ante’ even going so far as to offer amnesty to

²⁵ See cover of *The Spectator*, 24 September 2022.

²⁶ Pjotr Sauer, ‘Putin Flirts Again with the Grim Prospect of Nuclear War – This Time He Might Mean It’, *The Guardian*, 21 September 2022.

²⁷ ‘Putin Says West Seeking to Weaken and Destroy Russia’, *TASS News Agency*, Moscow, 12 September 2022.

²⁸ Katie Bo Lillis, ‘Russia’s Military Divided as Putin Struggles with Ukraine’s Counteroffensive, US Sources Say’, *CNN Politics*, 22 September 2022.

²⁹ Anatol Lieven, ‘Tick-Tock: Putin Escalation Begins Countdown of Diplomacy Clock’, *Responsible Statecraft*, 22 September 2022.

³⁰ Sebastian Seibt, ‘“Danger to the Regime?”: Russia Faces Ethnic Minority Anti-Mobilisation Protests’, *France 24*, 30 September 2022.

prisoners in Russia's less than luxurious jails, while introducing a number of amendments to Russian law stipulating extremely harsh measures against all those about to be called up who failed to report for military duty, surrendering or refusing to fight.³¹

Where all this was likely to lead was by no means clear. However, as one of the better informed analysts of the current crisis has convincingly argued, by taking decisive action now and making sure Russia held on to what it had already seized and declaring this territory to be formally part of Russia, he hoped (possibly against hope) that he could stabilize the situation back in Ukraine and then dare anyone to try and change these newly established 'facts on the ground'. Meanwhile, if he could prolong the war long enough well into 2023, this would allow his 'unconventional campaign of economic warfare, political destabilisation, escalation threats, and influence campaigns in Europe and the US to cause Ukraine's allies to force Kyiv to negotiate'. Putin it seemed still had options. Perhaps they were not very good ones. But he was not beaten yet.³²

Xi's response

China's immediate response to all this was what it had been throughout the war, namely calling on all parties to desist from fighting but saying nothing critical about Russia or favourable about Ukraine. But if the view in the West was that Putin's situation was looking ever more desperate,³³ and his actions even more provocative than usual—a view also echoed by the UN chief in late September—the stance adopted by China in public at least exuded an air of almost studied serenity possibly because (although we can never know for sure) Putin may have already reassured Xi that he still had options which even if these no longer included victory over the whole of Ukraine, might prevent the West claiming victory and in time bring the war to an end, two objectives with which Beijing would be in full agreement.

Whether or not Xi was ever going to be reassured by a leader who looked to be on the backfoot militarily while facing instability in Russia itself and threatening the use of nuclear weapons was by no means clear. Indeed, rumours were rife by September that Beijing was beginning to get decidedly nervous about the war that Putin might be beginning to lose. Xi after all must have thought he had been backing a winner not a loser.³⁴ Nor could Xi be sure that setbacks for Russia in Ukraine would not have an impact in Beijing itself, possibly even emboldening critics to argue that a change in course was now necessary, if only to prevent a complete collapse in relations with the West. One noted expert with long experience analysing China, even wondered

³¹ Alexander Gabuev, 'Why is Putin Upping the Ante in Ukraine?', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 September 2022.

³² See Jack Watling, 'Time is the Hidden Flank in Assessing Russia's Mobilisation', *RUSI*, 23 September 2022.

³³ 'Vladimir Putin's Situation Looks Ever More Desperate', *The Economist*, 20 September 2022.

³⁴ Former Ambassador Mark C. Storella, 'Does China Win Betting on Losers?', *The Hill*, 24 March 2022.

whether the military crisis in Russia would at last lead China away from the more assertive foreign policy stance it had adopted since Xi had come to power, to return to a more 'low profile' strategy.³⁵

Never one to act in haste, Xi clearly felt he had few options other than to put up the diplomatic shutters. hope for the best while possibly fearing for the worst. The last thing he was likely do however was admonish his 'best friend' Putin who in what looked like a very well-rehearsed piece of diplomatic theatre informed Xi when they met in Samarkand in September that he understood that Xi might have some 'questions and concerns' that needed to be addressed. What these concerns were was never made clear, though Putin did allude to the fact that these had been 'spoken' about 'before', the clear implication being that this was hardly the first time, and possibly not the last, when such issues had been discussed between the two leaders.³⁶

Even raising the issue in such a public fashion was not without significance. Indeed, so significant did it seem to be that the official press back in China did not even report what Putin had said.³⁷ In the West, however, his words set off a wave of highly speculative commentary, even leading some pundits to conclude that a potentially serious divide might now be opening up between the two countries. One foreign policy magazine even ran with the dramatic headline question as to whether or not China was now 'breaking' with Russia?³⁸ A well respected writer on foreign affairs indeed suggested that Xi might now be beginning to regret 'embracing his Russian counterpart'.³⁹ A couple of days earlier, the same newspaper then informed its readers that along with Modi of India, Xi was no longer 'standing with Putin' over the war.⁴⁰ This was then followed by another piece (but in another publication) which informed its readers that whereas in the past Chinese public opinion had been on the side of Russia, ordinary Chinese were now beginning to change their minds.⁴¹

Of course, nobody doubted that there were 'frictions' in the relationship and that below the surface of diplomatic niceties these were becoming all the more serious. It was certainly not beyond the bounds of possibility that 'behind the scenes' Chinese

³⁵ Francois Godemont, 'China's Foreign Policy: It's Time for a Return to Low Profile', *Institut Montaigne*, 14 September 2022.

³⁶ Max Hunder, 'Putin Acknowledges China's Concern Over Ukraine in Sign of Friction', *Reuters*, 15 September 2022.

³⁷ Though according to one source, Putin's comments were 'heavily discussed' on social media in China where it drew a 'mix of shock and criticism that censors did not remove'. See Brenda Goh, 'As Putin Escalates War in Ukraine, China Stands Awkwardly by Him', *The Japan Times*, 16 September 2022.

³⁸ Shannon Tiezzi, 'Is China Breaking With Russia Over Ukraine?', *The Diplomat*, 17 September 2022. The headline was rather more dramatic than the content of the article which went on to argue that the partnership with Russia was too important for China to 'truly' abandon its ally.

³⁹ Gideon Rachman, 'Putin, Xi and the Limits of Friendship', *Financial Times*, 20 September 2022.

⁴⁰ Henry Foy, Max Seddon and John Reed, 'Xi and Modi "Not Standing" with Putin Over the War, Analysts Say', *Financial Times*, 18 September 2022.

⁴¹ Mu Chunshan, 'China's Public Opinion Is Shifting Away From Russia', *The Diplomat*, 21 September 2022.

official were expressing their concerns, perhaps even criticizing Russia.⁴² But it was one thing to raise doubts in private; quite another to conclude as some western analysts now seemed to be doing that the relationship was facing a major crisis. Xi himself may well have been concerned and worried. But in their rush to discover deep cracks in a relationship that some had always had their doubts about anyway—merely ‘convenient’⁴³ according to one writer and a most ‘rocky affair’ according to two others⁴⁴—most pundits seemed to pass over what Xi did or did not say by way of response to Putin’s comments about the war itself.

As it turned out, Xi did not even mention Ukraine. He did however go on to welcome Putin’s statement of support over Taiwan and Beijing’s ‘One China’ principle. He also called upon the two nations to strengthen their cooperation across a number of areas of common economic interest and security. He then called upon both to work with others to coordinate their work in international bodies such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS. Finally, he affirmed that China was ready to work with Russia across a range of issues in order for both to achieve their respective ‘core interests’ together. If this was a signal that he was no longer backing, or was even backing away from Putin, this was a distinctly odd way of showing it.⁴⁵

Friendship reaffirmed

But it was just as much what was happening outside the conference room itself, as what was being said within it, that mattered. Here all the signs pointed not to a serious fraying of the relationship but a series of moves to reaffirm it. Thus only a few days before Putin and Xi met, the two countries held yet another military exercise, which given the context was a strong indication, that ‘security cooperation between Russia and China’ was continuing ‘to grow’.⁴⁶ Along with a number of other countries in the wider Eurasian region, Russia and China then attended the most important trade event in the Far East, significantly held under the banner title of ‘On the Path to a Multipolar World’.⁴⁷ Then, as if to confirm the growing importance of the economic links between the two countries, figures put out for September pointed to yet another sharp rise in their two way trade.⁴⁸

⁴² Gregor Schwung, ‘The Xi-Putin Alliance is Dead: Long Live the Alliance’, *Die Welt*, English Edition, 20 September 2022.

⁴³ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics* (Chatham House: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

⁴⁴ Yu Jie and Mathieu Boulegue, ‘Russia and China: A Rocky Affair’, *Chatham House*, 1 April 2020.

⁴⁵ Cao Dasheng, ‘President Xi Meets with Putin in Samarkand’, *China Daily*, 15 September 2022.

⁴⁶ Emily Ferris and Veerie Nouwens, ‘Russia’s Vostok 2022 Military Drills: Not Size or Tanks but Context’, *RUSI*, 15 September 2022.

⁴⁷ ‘7th Eastern Economic Forum Kicks off in Russia’s Vladivostok’, *XinhuaNet*, 5 September 2022.

⁴⁸ See Antonia Hmadi and Francois Chimets, ‘China Has Shown No Restraint in Its Trading with Russia’, *Le Monde*, 9 September 2001.

But there were other, perhaps even more significant indicators, pointing to how aligned the policies of the two countries' remained. One was provided by a meeting held in Moscow attended by Li Zhanshu, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and number three member of the Politburo Standing Committee.⁴⁹ Much was made of the fact that the full text of what was discussed was not reported by the press back in Beijing. This however did not alter what was actually said in Moscow itself. Here Li Zhanshu (reported to be a close associate of Xi's) made it perfectly clear to his Russian counterparts that China still stood four square behind Moscow over Ukraine. As he put it, though only repeating here what China had been stating for months, Russia had been put in an 'impossible situation' over Ukraine, but after careful consideration went on to respond 'firmly' and correctly.⁵⁰ A little later at a separate meeting with Putin himself he also repeated what China had been saying throughout: that western sanctions against Russia and the West more generally were the problem; China and Russia would therefore need to cooperate even more closely to fight any 'external interference' into their internal affairs.⁵¹

Another meeting, this time held in China, pointed to the same level of mutual understanding when one of Putin's key national security advisers—Nikolai Patrushev—led a Russian delegation in face-to-face meetings with leading security officials in China. Though only announced with the tersest of official statements by Beijing itself,⁵² the meetings over two days addressed a number of questions, but focused in general on finding ways and means of further enhancing the 'comprehensive partnership' and strategic cooperation between the two countries. Following the meeting with the Chinese delegation led by Guo Shengkun—China's top security chief since 2017 and known amongst other things for claiming that social stability in Xinjiang had been hard won through 'reform through education'⁵³—Patrushev's office then went on to issue a statement, noting that both parties had agreed to 'expand information exchanges on countering extremism and foreign attempts to undermine the constitutional order of both countries'.⁵⁴ The statement in of itself may not have been remarkable, though did point to how much both sides saw the other as a key to their own stability. But what was significant was that the main Russian negotiator was Patrushev himself, a former head of the FSB, secretary to

⁴⁹ 'Li Zhanshu Calls for United Front Against Western Sanctions', *South China Morning Post*, 12 September 2022.

⁵⁰ 'Leaders of the State Duma Factions Met with Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress', *The State Duma*, 9 September 2022.

⁵¹ 'China Legislator Criticizes Sanctions on Visit to Russia', *Voice of America (VOA)*, 11 September 2022.

⁵² 'China and Russia to Hold the 17th Round of Strategic Security Consultation and the 7th Meeting of Law-Enforcement and Security Cooperation Mechanism', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 18 September 2022.

⁵³ Quoted by long-time Beijing correspondent Clifford Coonan, 'Xinjiang's Social Stability "Hard Won" Claims Chinese Minister', *The Irish Times*, 21 September 2018.

⁵⁴ 'Russia and China Agree to Expand Security Ties', *Aljazeera*, 19 September 2022.

the Kremlin's security council, and widely regarded as being very close to Putin himself.⁵⁵

Hegemon unmasked

Even though Patrushev and Li Zhanshu did not name the foreign or external power that was actively trying to undermine China and Russia, it was fairly self-evident to which particular country they were both referring. Of course, unlike Russia, China may have still been hoping that relations with the United States might at some point in the future become less confrontational. Indeed, the Chinese foreign minister implied this when he met with his American counterpart at the UN later in September. But as he also went on to suggest, the relationship stood at a 'critical juncture' not because of anything China had done, but because of 'erroneous acts' undertaken by the US itself. Therefore, if Washington wanted to see any change in the relationship it would have to desist from doing what it was doing and stop trying to deal with China 'from a position of strength', reverse its economic policies aimed at suppressing 'China's development', and more generally, stop trying to maintain its dominant role in the world by wantonly engaging in acts of 'unilateral hegemony'.⁵⁶

Nor did China's long list of complaints end there. Indeed, amongst those most often referred to by other Chinese officials and endlessly repeated in the Chinese press, were America's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade back in 1999—something that Beijing was never likely to forgive or forget, the US's refusal to own up to its own war crimes carried out in the past including those committed during the war in Iraq, its unfounded complaints about the situation in Xinjiang, Washington's 'illegal' use of sanctions against Russia, its secret and largely unexplained use of biological labs in Ukraine itself, and perhaps most frequently mentioned of all, the fact that it was keeping the war going by continuing to provide military support for Ukraine. The ongoing war in Ukraine may have become increasingly 'worrisome' according to a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson answering questions at a press conference in October. Even so, it was clear who still remained the main culprit.⁵⁷

But in terms of sheer vitriol nobody came close to Zhao Lijian, an accomplished past master at invective when it came to the US. Once referred to in *The New York Times* as being the man behind 'China's aggressive new voice',⁵⁸ in one fairly typical press

⁵⁵ Vladimir Isachenkov, 'Russia Seeks Closer Security Ties with China as Key Goal', *The Diplomat*, 19 September 2022.

⁵⁶ 'Wang Yi Meets with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 24 September 2022.

⁵⁷ See 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on October 11, 2022', *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Belgium*. For an earlier sample of China's various complaints against the US see 'China's Puts Forward Two Lists During Talks with Visiting Deputy Secretary of State', *XinhuaNet*, 26 July 2022.

⁵⁸ *The New York Times*, 7 July 2022.

conference hosted in late September he could hardly contain his contempt for the United States. Not only had it failed to deal with its 'original' sin of slavery while at the same dumping toxic substances in Japan; it was also solely responsible, or so he implied, of causing a 'bitter economic recession' that was leading to untold misery in 'many developing countries'! Nor could he resist mentioning how America even bullied its own allies like the UK. As he pointed out in evident glee, while the British were 'ready to cooperate with Huawei', a senior director for Asian Affairs at the US National Security Council travelled to the UK and yelled at the UK representatives for five hours to pressure the UK to abandon Huawei', which it then felt it had no choice but to do. Thus, it was not just US rivals and enemies who were at risk of being coerced and bullied, so to were its 'close allies'. America may talk about creating a 'rules-based order' but when its own 'hegemonic interests' were at stake, it really didn't care about such things.⁵⁹

From 'colour revolutions' to Taiwan

China's grievances against the US were thus many and serious. One however which possibly preoccupied both Beijing and Moscow as much as any other was what it claimed was the US's persistent attempt to bring about regime change in countries with which it happened to disagree. Never one to play down the threat posed by America and the West, Putin even claimed to have seen the not-so-hidden hand of Washington back in 2004 when Ukraine experienced a series of internal upheavals; he also saw the same hand or hands as being present when in early 2022 Russian-led forces had been compelled to intervene to restore 'order' in Kazakhstan, a close neighbour of both Moscow and Beijing with which China also happened to share the longest continuous border in the world (4750 miles).⁶⁰

It was perhaps no coincidence therefore that right in the middle of his discussions with Putin and his various partners at the 16th summit of SCO held in Samarkand in Uzbekistan, Xi warned that the greatest threat facing all countries within the region was what he tellingly referred to as 'colour revolutions'. Such so-called revolutions not only undermined progress he argued. There was every chance they would be exploited (if they were not in fact being instigated) by what he vaguely termed 'external forces'. No doubt for diplomatic reasons he did not name names, but again it was fairly obvious which particular country Xi was referring to when he went on to talk of all those in our turbulent 'world today' who continued to hold on to a 'Cold War mentality' while adhering to the outdated and dangerous notion of 'bloc politics'.⁶¹

But what was of much greater concern to Beijing and clearly at the 'heart' of its dispute with the US, was what it saw as the America's increasingly aggressive

⁵⁹ 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on September 2, 2022', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 22 September 2022.

⁶⁰ Gideon Rachman, 'Russia and China's Plan for a New World Order', *Financial Times*, 21 January 2022.

⁶¹ See 'Full Text of Xi's Speech at SCO Samarkand Summit', *ChinaDaily.Com.Cn*, 16 September 2022.

policy stance over Taiwan within a wider US policy of trying to contain China.⁶² It might have all begun under Trump, but Biden in its view was only continuing the policy, first by underwriting closer security ties with UK and Australia under the heading of AUKUS (another indication of America's 'double standards' according to Beijing),⁶³ then hosting a 'Summit of Democracy' to which China and Russia were not invited (against which China then launched a 'propaganda blitz'),⁶⁴ and a few months later allowing House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, to visit Taipei.

The last move was seen as particularly provocative, but only pointed to what many in Beijing believed was already happening: that Washington in effect was abandoning its 'One China' position while moving away from a policy of 'strategic ambiguity' to 'strategic clarity' regarding Taiwan.⁶⁵ Certainly, its robust response following Pelosi's visit sent out a clear message that it would respond most forcefully to such 'provocations'. Even so, in a region where its economic weight may have counted for a great deal but its strategic actions were generating deep suspicion amongst other countries, it needed someone else with a real interest in backing China to move in behind it—and the only possible candidate with some capacity to do so was Russia.

Nor was Russia backward in coming forward. Indeed, it had gradually been becoming ever more vocal in support of China since 2016 following the election of the Democratic Progressive Party's candidate, Tsai Ing-Wen.⁶⁶ Tensions thereafter increased, with Taiwan complaining of increasing Chinese attacks on the island, using cyber attacks, pressuring global corporations 'to list Taiwan as a Chinese province' and increasing 'the frequency and scale of patrols of PLA bombers, fighter jets, and surveillance aircraft over and around Taiwan' while increasingly sailing 'its warships and aircraft carriers through the Taiwan Strait in shows of force'.⁶⁷ Nor did Russia seem in any way to be bothered by this, especially when Taiwan itself later joined with the US in condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and in August lumped Russia and China together as the main combined threat to international order.⁶⁸

It should thus have come as no great surprise when Putin on the 15th September (much to the annoyance of Taipei) reiterated Russia's support for the 'principle of "One China" while condemning "provocations by the United States and their satellites in the Taiwan Strait"'. A week later the Chinese and Russian foreign ministers then met in New York and 'noted with satisfaction the high efficiency of cooperation

⁶² See comments on Taiwan by Wang Wenbin at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 27 and 28 September 2022.

⁶³ 'China Refutes U.S Claim Concerning AUKUS Cooperation', *XinhuaNet*, 17 December 2022.

⁶⁴ 'Not Invited to Biden's Democracy Summit, China Launches a Propaganda Blitz', *NPR*, 9 December 2021.

⁶⁵ Michael Malincoli, 'Is the US Moving Towards Strategic Clarity on Taiwan? The Repercussions for Europe', *Real Instituto Alcano*, 1 August 2022.

⁶⁶ 'China Values Russia's Support on Taiwan – Foreign Ministry', *TASS*, Moscow, 20 May 2016.

⁶⁷ Lindsay Maizland, 'Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 3 August 2022.

⁶⁸ 'Taiwan Warns of Authoritarian Threat Posed by Russia and China', *Los Angeles Times*, 26 August 2022.

between Russia and China' at the UN.⁶⁹ Then, as if almost to prove the point, Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, then followed up with a speech to the General Assembly using language that China had often used in attacking the US over Ukraine—that the Americans were 'playing with fire' over the fate of the island.⁷⁰ In of itself the attack was neither new nor especially original. But it was both significant and symbolic. In the past China in particular had never liked linking that was happening in Ukraine to what was occurring in Taiwan. Now a leading Russian spokesperson was doing so in a most public way—a move that drew not an iota of criticism in Zhongnanhai where Putin's clear support for China on Taiwan almost certainly outweighed any 'concerns' Xi may have had about Ukraine.⁷¹

Conclusion

As we have tried to suggest here, ongoing Russian setbacks from the 'plains and river valleys of Donetsk' to that very long and not so secure bridge once connecting Crimea and Russia, were clearly not going to be enough to make Xi rethink his relationship with Putin.⁷² This however did not mean that Beijing wished to see the war in Ukraine continue indefinitely. In fact, as if to prove how keen it was in promoting a peace agreement of some description, it issued yet another plea—this time in association with India at the UN—calling on both Russia and Ukraine to 'keep the crisis from spilling over'. However, as Wang Yi the Chinese foreign minister noted, until 'the legitimate security concerns of all parties' including by definition Russia could be met by establishing 'a balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture', then there appeared to be little chance in practice of the peace he was calling for ever being realized.⁷³

It is true of course that on the side-lines of the UN in New York, Wang Yi met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, their first talks since the conflict had broken out several months before.⁷⁴ However, when another Chinese spokesperson was then asked when President Xi would actually be talking directly to the Ukrainian President himself about how to bring about the peace that China seemed so keen to promote, the decidedly non-committal reply coming from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was that China and Ukraine were 'strategic partners' whose bilateral trade before the war had risen to \$19.3 billion, up by 29.7%.⁷⁵ Moreover, when the UN

⁶⁹ 'Russian, Chinese Top Diplomats Castigate Destructive Policy Towards Taiwan – Statement', *TASS*, Moscow, 22 September 2022.

⁷⁰ 'Russia's Top Envoy Accuses Washington of "Playing with Fire" Around Taiwan', *The Japan Times*, 25 September 2022.

⁷¹ 'Putin's Support for China on Taiwan Outweighs Any of Xi's Concerns About Ukraine', *The Japan Times*, 16 September 2022.

⁷² See Chaguan, 'China Will Not Ditch Russia, for Now', *The Economist*, 17 September 2022.

⁷³ 'China, India Call for a Negotiated Way Out of Ukraine War', *Le Monde*, 24 September 2022.

⁷⁴ 'Wang Yi Meets with Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba of Ukraine', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 23 September 2022.

⁷⁵ 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on September 26, 2022', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China*.

then moved to condemn Putin's annexations in Ukraine, instead of voting for the resolution, Beijing once again did what it had done throughout the war when confronted with anything critical of Russia: it abstained.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, as China grappled with the awkward problem of squaring the circle of both diplomatically backing Russia while insisting that it was not even a 'party to the war', the conflict in Ukraine not only continued unabated, but very much looked as if it might escalate. Yet in spite of this, there was little indication that Xi himself had any intention of abandoning a friend whom he had met on no less than 40 occasions, and whose outlook on the world was one with which he was in broad agreement.

Of course, the partnership, like any partnership, was not without 'contradiction' as the Chinese might have put it. Nor did it come without a price tag attached. Indeed, as Arne Westad has pointed out, in the process by covering Russia's back in Ukraine, China has only managed to burn 'its bridges in Europe'.⁷⁷ However, when viewed from Zhongnanhai this was an unfortunate but necessary cost that would have to be borne for securing the continued loyalty of an increasingly besieged (and dependent) ally based several thousand miles away in Moscow.⁷⁸ Putin once confessed that he could not 'afford to lose' the war in Ukraine.⁷⁹ Xi appears to have made much the same calculation about Putin, and has done so 'not despite Russia's recent battlefield setbacks' but almost certainly 'because of them'.⁸⁰

Only time would tell how things might unfold in a fast moving situation, where to use an overused cliché, the only certainty was uncertainty. But for the foreseeable future at least, there was every indication that the two leaders would continue to row in the same direction as they had been doing for some time, not just because they were trying to steer towards the same point on the international horizon—a world they hoped in which the United States and a declining West would no longer be defining the global agenda—but out of a fear that if they didn't continue doing so, the boat which they had built together might well be swamped by the rough and turbulent waters that surrounded it. To use yet another cliché, having made their own Faustian pact they probably understood better than most that they only had one of two choices going forward: either to stick together or hang separately.

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⁷⁶ 'China and India Abstain in UN Security Vote on Referendum Resolution', TASS, Moscow, 30 September 2022.

⁷⁷ Odd Arne Westad, 'The Next Sino-Russian Split? Beijing Will Ultimately Come to Regret Its Support for Moscow', *Yale Macmillan Centre*, 8 April 2022.

⁷⁸ Bjorn Alexander Duben, 'What Putin's War in Ukraine Means for the Future of China-Russia Relations', *LSE IDEAS Strategic Update*, 2022.

⁷⁹ Edward Luce, 'Transcript: Vladimir Putin "Doesn't Believe He Can Afford to Lose" – William Burns, CIA Director', *Financial Times*, 8 May 2022.

⁸⁰ Craig Singleton, 'How Far Will Xi Go to Help a Desperate Putin?', *Foreign Policy*, 6 October 2022.

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