



Michael Cox

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Peace in Our Time? Xi, Putin and the War in Ukraine – Part Two

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Peace offensive

Wang Yi goes travelling

Xi's own personal relationship with Putin and China's close ties to Russia did not however imply agreement on everything. Moreover, it was clear that the longer the war went on the more likely it was that China would become more involved diplomatically – in part to prevent escalation and in part to maintain its credibility as an independent international actor with a distinct view of its own. Tacitly backing Russia was all very well. But Beijing still needed to carve out a position of its own and the most obvious way of doing this was by declaring that it was in favour of 'peace'.

The problem for China however was that for every step it took forward to convincing people that it was on the side of peace, it then took another one backwards by refusing to say anything critical about the country which had launched the war in the first place. Nor did the Chinese official charged with leading the 'peace offensive' do much to convince public opinion in the West that China was entirely serious. Having just been promoted to a very senior position in the hierarchy, Wang Yi was perfectly placed to make the case when speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February 2023. However, his interventions did not go down well.[1]

First he refused to call the invasion by its real name. He then tried to split the Europeans from the United States by flattering the former and launching all sorts of ideological sorties against the latter. To make matters worse he launched an attack on some unspecified 'people' who neither cared about peace or the lives of 'Ukrainians' (though again without mentioning Russia). Nor did he win many friends either when he reminded his audience that 'Taiwan has never been a state, nor will it ever be'. [2] If his goal in Munich had been to win hearts and minds, his efforts singularly failed. It was, as one observer noted at the time, 'an epic misreading of the room'. [3]

Wang's credibility as a dove of peace suffered yet another setback when after having left Europe he travelled on to Moscow where he was afforded what can only be described as the warmest of welcomes. [4] The fact that his visit came on the eve of the first anniversary of the Russian invasion did not go unnoticed; nor did the body language at the various meetings, including those he held with his old sparring partner, Sergei Lavrov. It was almost like a school reunion between old friends. Wang's discussion with Putin went equally well. As one analyst noted a short while after, the 'mood' music between the two men 'was demonstratively exuberant'. [5]

The ensuing discussions did of necessity include an exchange of views about the situation in Ukraine. But nothing that Wang said or did in public at least suggested he was putting any pressure on his hosts to withdraw its troops or announce a ceasefire. Wang himself may have insisted that China was looking for a 'political solution' to the conflict. But that was as far as he was prepared to go. He was far clearer however when it came to Russia. [6] As he argued, China would continue to work to maintain 'momentum' in its relations with Russia 'against the backdrop of a very complex and volatile international situation'. 'A crisis is always an

opportunity' he added, and this particular crisis he implied would allow the two countries to further develop their new type of 'major-country' relationship. Moreover, they would do so he added in spite of the 'pressure' the two countries had been put under by certain members of 'the international community' and various other 'third parties.'^[7]

Beyond Wolf Warrior diplomacy?^[8]

If one of the most important consequences of Wang's trip to Moscow was to reaffirm China's relationship with Russia, then another was to reinforce what by now must have been obvious: that China was for the foreseeable future locked into an abrasive competition with the United States from which there could be no easy exit. And as if to drive the point home, the official Chinese news agency *Xinhua* went on to publish a lengthy and highly critical analysis of the United States. No stone was left unturned proving America's malign intent. Nor was its malevolent purpose of just recent origin. Its dubious activities we were informed in fact went all the way back to 1776 when the US gained independence from the British! Nor did its behaviour get any better in the 21st century. Indeed, having seen off the USSR it probably got worse culminating with interventions in the Middle East that caused nearly a million deaths, a third of whom were civilians. It was not a pretty picture.^[9]

Thus having dispensed with the United States in a manner of which Putin himself would have been justly proud (not long after *Xinhua* published two other full length attacks on the United States)^[10], Beijing then decided to bring out two 'position papers'. One dealt in very general terms with its own approach to global security. There was little in the document that was especially original or new, with much stress placed on China's positive role in sorting out the world's problems. It said nothing however about the contribution that had been, or might in the future be made by the West. The G7 did not get a mention, nor the World Bank, the IMF or even the European Union. If security, as the Chinese oft-claimed was indivisible, then it was strange to say the least that the West and the various international bodies through which it operated, had little part to play in bringing it about.^[11]

The so-called 'concept paper' on global security was quickly followed with something of much greater importance: a 12-point peace programme dealing more directly with what Beijing liked to call the 'crisis' in Ukraine.^[12] Announced

with great fanfare as a major initiative – and almost certainly following consultations with Russia itself – the set of proposals were heavy on generalities but decidedly light on detail. Mention was made of the need to respect the ‘sovereignty’ of all countries, though with no hint that Russian actions in Ukraine might have undermined this particular principle. The paper talked of the need to deal with the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, without mentioning how little China had done itself. It then went on to criticize sanctions but failed to explain why they may have been imposed on Russia in the first place. And to cap it all, it repeated the old line which both Moscow and Beijing had endorsed together before the war, that there was a need to reform the pre-existing European security architecture so as to take account of the ‘legitimate security’ interests of all nations (in other words, Russia’s).[13]

Unsurprisingly, China’s ‘plan for peace’ had few takers in the West. But the West was never its intended audience. That lay further South in those countries where China had many friends. China did not even try to hide the fact that the underlying purpose of its peace strategy was not so much to bring about a speedy end to the conflict in Ukraine – Moscow had already made it clear that the time was not ripe for an end to its ‘military operations’ – but rather demonstrate to the world at large that while it at least was seeking a way out of the crisis, the Americans and their NATO allies were only throwing fuel on to the flames. It could also point (and did) to past achievements in bringing about peace; indeed it made great play in its own press of what it had done in mid-March when it had brokered a deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran.[14] With pictures of a beaming Wang Yi standing between the leaders of the two opposed countries, it was clear what message he was trying to send out: that while China was able to create peace in one of the world’s hotspots, all that the United States could do was stand on the side-lines complaining. Weighed down by its cold war prejudices and desire to run the world on its own terms, Washington according to this narrative had become a mere onlooker when it came to solving the world’s most intractable problems.[15] As the headline in one Asian newspaper put it, China had now become the ‘world’s peacemaker’.[16]

Xi goes to Moscow

But in the end all this was but preparatory for the long planned visit made by Xi to Moscow in March. Carefully choreographed by the Russians, this was summitry of the highest order with red carpets and guards of honour paying homage to the

Chinese leader as he finally made his way to the Kremlin before ascending its grand marble staircase in style. This was a state visit designed to impress, and in many ways it did.

It also cocked a very large snook at the West. As one news agency put it, Xi and Putin were flaunting their alliance in a most public way with the very clear intent of showing how little they really cared what critics in western capitals might think.^[17] The very fact that Xi was in Moscow almost celebrating with Putin just a few days after Putin had been arraigned by the International Criminal Court, spoke volumes about Beijing's indifference to western public opinion.^[18] It also hinted at a high degree of indifference to Ukraine too. Rumours abounded that Xi would very soon be meeting with President Zelensky – something he had notably failed to do since the invasion had begun. But in spite of the Ukrainian President's open call for the two leaders to meet, nothing then happened.^[19] Indeed, when a spokesperson of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs was later asked when such a meeting might take place, the questioner was brushed off with the non-committal reply that China had (in its own words) 'maintained communication with all relevant parties, including Ukraine'.^[20]

Meanwhile the real war in Ukraine itself continued unchecked with little incentive on either side to sit around that theoretical peace table being proposed by Beijing. Nor to be blunt did either China or the US appear to be in any great hurry to put pressure on their respective allies: China because it presumably hoped Russia might soon be in a stronger position on the ground and Washington because it saw the war tilting in Ukraine's direction. However, on one thing both were agreed: that they could not allow their own chosen side to lose. The war in Ukraine might have begun life as a localized conflict. By 2023 however it had morphed into something much wider involving one superpower seeking to uphold its version of world order and another aiming to write the rules anew. The stakes in Ukraine could not have been higher.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the China Foresight Forum, LSE IDEAS, nor The London School of Economics and Political Science.

"Awakened peoples, you will certainly attain the ultimate victory!" by **Kent Wang** is licensed under **CC BY-SA 2.0**.

[1] See Michael Clarke, 'Wang Yi's fruitless diplomacy in Europe', *The Interpreter*, 22 February, 2023.

[2] 'Wang Yi: To Safeguard Peace Across the Taiwan Strait, We Must Resolutely Oppose "Independence"', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Beijing, 18 February 2023.

[3] David Pearson, 'China's Courtship of Europe Hits a Russian Wall', *The New York Times*, February 21, 2023.

[4] See 'Wang Yi Meets with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov' *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Beijing, 22 February 2023

[5] 'China foreign politician Wang in Moscow: On the handshake in the Kremlin', *News in Germany*, <https://newsingermany.com/china-foreign-politician-wang-in-moscow-on-the-handshake-in-the-kremlin/>

[6] Stephen McDonnell, 'Ukraine war: China's claim to neutrality fades with Moscow visit', *BBC News*, 22 February 2023.

[7] Laura Zhou and Kawala Xie, 'China and Russia won't be swayed by others, Beijing's top diplomat tells Putin', *South China Morning Post*, 22 February 2023.

[8] Pete Sweeney, 'China's wolf warriors start 2023 in retreat', *Reuters*, January 10, 2023.

[9] U.S. Hegemony and Its Perils' *Xinhua News Agency*, February 20, 2023.

[10] See Xinhua, 'The Full Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2022' (28 March 2023) and 'U.S. Human Rights Abuse Against Refugees and Immigrants: Truth and Facts', (30 March 2023).

[11] 'The Global Security Initiative Paper', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Beijing, 21 February 2023.

[12] See 'China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Beijing, 24 February 2023.

[13] 'China calls for Ukraine ceasefire with 12-point peace plan', *The National*, February 24, 2023.

[14] 'Saudi Arabian agreement to restore ties benefits regional security, shows China's goodwill to promote global security', *People's Daily Online*, March 14, 2023.

- [15] Peter Baker, 'Chinese-Brokered Deal Upends Mideast Diplomacy and challenges U.S.' *The New York Times*, March 11, 2023.
- [16] Herman Tiu Laurel, 'China: World's Peacemaker', *Philippine News Agency*. March 21, 2023.
- [17] Reid Standish, 'China in Eurasia Briefing: Xi's Long Term Bet on Putin', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 22, 2023.
- [18] 'Putin flaunts alliance with Xi as "dear friends" meet in Kremlin', *Reuters*, March 21, 2023.
- China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Beijing, 24 February 2023. Lin
- [19] 'Zelensky invites China's Xi Jinping to Ukraine', *The Kyiv Independent*, March 29, 2023.
- [20] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Regular Press Conference*, March 29 2023.

About the author



Michael Cox

Professor Michael Cox was appointed to a Chair at the LSE in 2002. He was a Founding Director of LSE IDEAS and is now Emeritus Professor of International Relations. He has served as Senior Fellow at the Nobel Institute in Oslo and is now a visiting professor at the Catholic University of Milan. He is the author, editor and co-editor of several books including works on E.H.Carr, Keynes, US foreign policy and the Cold War. His most recent volume, *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden* was published in 2022. It is now being translated into Italian and will be published by Vita E Penserio Press. He has also just completed a volume for LSE Press entitled *Afghanistan: Long War – Forgotten Peace* and is now working on a study of the China-Russian relationship entitled, *Comrades?* to be published by Polity Press in 2023.