

China's Support Is a Game Changer for Russia

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During the visit by President Vladimir Putin to Beijing on Friday, the world attention was focused on how far China would go in support of Russia in the latter's standoff with the US and NATO. From the [joint statement issued after the visit](#), China has given fulsome support to Russia, endorsing Moscow's demand for security guarantee and its opposition to NATO expansion, the two core issues.

Russia never expected or sought any Chinese intervention in any military confrontation with the western alliance. Russia has the capability to safeguard its sovereignty.

The Chinese support to Russia at the present juncture can still manifest in a variety of ways. Aside China's backing at the UN Security Council, what really matters most for Moscow would be the myriad ways in which Beijing can mitigate the effect of any harsh western sanctions against by way of transfer of technology, trade, investments, etc. Conceivably, Putin and Xi Jinping have reached an understanding.

Already, a significant step has been taken this direction during Putin's visit with the agreement on new Russian oil and gas deals with China worth an estimated \$117.5 billion, and China promising to ramp up Russia's Far East exports. A new 30-year contract to supply 10 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year to China from Russia's Far East was signed.

Separately, Russian oil giant Rosneft signed a deal with China's CNPC to supply 100 million tonnes of oil through Kazakhstan over 10 years, effectively extending an existing deal, which is worth an estimated \$80 bn. The construction of the Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline to China with a massive capacity of 50 bcm annually is also under discussion.

No doubt, Russia is seriously diversifying its markets for oil and gas exports. This will create space for Moscow to negotiate with its European partners. The new deal with Beijing will not necessitate diversion of Russia's gas exports to Europe, as they are linked to the gas reserves from the Pacific island of Sakhalin, whereas Russia's European pipeline network sources gas from the Siberian fields.

The ball is in now entirely in the European court — whether to continue to source assured

energy supplies from Russia at such incredibly low prices or punish itself by forgoing that option.

While sanctions may inflict some dislocation initially necessitating readjustments, Moscow will cope with it, as past experience shows. With around \$640 billion in foreign exchange reserves, Moscow could persevere longer than the Europeans in the energy market.

The big question is about Putin's decisions regarding the dangerous situation on Russia's western borders. The short answer is that Putin will not be browbeaten by the Biden Administration's threat of sanctions.

China does not consider that a full scale invasion of Ukraine is in the Russian calculus but it neatly sidesteps the issue, nonetheless. Putin acts very cautiously, and almost always is reactive. Be it in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria or Ukraine itself, that has been the pattern. Of course, it is a different matter that in all these instances, Putin acted decisively to make sure his objectives were realised.

In the situation surrounding Ukraine, the Biden Administration is forcing Putin's hands. The latest US and NATO troop reinforcements to Russia's neighbours—particularly to the Baltic states, in close proximity to St. Petersburg — were completely unwarranted and can only be seen as a calculated act of provocation when there has so far been no evidence of an adequate justification for a major Russian military operation.

Yet, there could be a method in this madness, given the real possibility of risky military operations in Donbass by an emboldened Ukrainian military or even worse, by the nationalist battalions in that region (to whom NATO has secretly provided a large influx of arms in recent weeks.)

In the event of any attack on Donbass, make no mistake, Russian intervention is guaranteed. The legislation under consideration with the Duma in Moscow currently factors in precisely such a contingency. It calls upon the Russian government to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk and, secondly, authorises the government to provide with new weapons to these two "people's republics."

A plausible scenario could be that Russia will patiently wait for the Ukrainian provocation. That is, it all boils down to a question of resolve. For Russia, the stakes are exceedingly high and its staying power is far greater than that of its Western adversaries.

There is a big element of brinkmanship here. What is happening in Europe at the moment has turned out to be a huge distraction for the US and as time passes, the Biden Administration would rue that its Indo-Pacific strategy is faltering and it is bogged down. The likelihood of Russia backing off is zero.

Evidently, the North Korean missile testing is already putting enormous strain on the US' alliance system in the Far East. Unlike Ukraine, the US' security interests are directly affected. Yet, on Friday, a US-drafted statement condemning Pyongyang crash-landed.

Ironically, China called on the US to be more flexible in its dealings with North Korea and joined six other member countries (including Russia and India) in refusing to sign the joint statement.

China's ambassador to the UN, Zhang Jun later told reporters,

"If they do want to see some new breakthrough, they should show more sincerity and flexibility. They should come up with more attractive and more practical, more flexible approaches, policies and actions and accommodating the concerns of the DPRK."

This is where the US is facing the new reality that its Cold War mentality to isolate China in the Asia-Pacific region and Russia in Europe will not work.

The solidarity between China and Russia reflected in Friday's joint statement goes far beyond the immediate crisis in Ukraine or the tensions over Taiwan and has an epochal significance heralding a new era in international relations based on a pluralistic world order where the role of the US will no longer be exclusive or defining.

Russia and China have a broad consensus today on almost all core issues related to global strategic stability, which is unprecedented in modern history.

The joint statement mentions the US not less than five times while highlighting the common stance of China and Russia on several key regional and global issues, including the expansion of NATO, the US-led ideological clique in the name of democracy, the US' Indo-Pacific strategy, AUKUS, etc.

Xi told Putin he is willing to work with him to plan a blueprint and guide the direction of China-Russia ties under the new historical conditions. China has lent support to the fundamental principle of the indivisibility of security that Russia is upholding. In these circumstances, if the US with its zero-sum mindset thinks it can defeat Russia through sanctions, it is being delusional.

Stonewalling the Russian demands is not going to be feasible, either. The challenge facing the Biden Administration will be how to preserve its credibility, especially in the European eyes. For, if Russia is compelled to act militarily to defend its non-negotiable core interests, as it will be at some point, a dangerous escalation may happen.

Is the US ready for an open-ended conflict with Russia? Are its allies game for it? Can they afford it? Will their domestic opinion allow it — war with a thermonuclear nuclear power in Europe to defend ill-defined notions?

A far better judicious course will be to seek a diplomatic formula that takes into account all these self-evident realities and negotiate some kind of a document that guarantees Russia's legitimate security needs.

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Featured image: Chinese President Xi Jinping (right) held talks with visiting Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, Beijing, Feb. 4, 2022. (Source: Indian Punchline)

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