

China's Peace Initiative on Ukraine–Russia War and India

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This is the issue:

On the first anniversary of the Russia-Ukraine war on February 24, 2023, while Russia vowed to intensify and escalate the military operations on the ground and tried to put up a brave face, Ukraine, the US, and its partners asserted that Russia would be defeated in the coming year. The same day, China proposed a [12-point peace plan](#) through a position paper called China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis. It emphasized respect for territorial sovereignty, comprehensive ceasefire, the safety of nuclear plants in Ukraine, and ending sanctions against Russia among others.

While the contents of the proposal had been articulated by China at various stages of the war since its beginning in Feb 2022, the position paper is yet another vague statement by China calling for peace and potentially signaling its intention to mediate an end to the one-year-old war that has triggered strategic, military, and economic impact beyond Europe. The US has rejected this proposal; Ukraine has stated its willingness to support any peace initiative while Russia has kept silent. India has not officially responded to the proposal, yet, discussions among the strategic community have been going on about its significance for China's position on the war. The overall consensus seems to assess the position paper as a non-starter and a non-workable proposal.

While India and China both have tried to balance their interests between their respective relations with Russia, the US, and European countries, their respective positions

are coming under pressure. The ongoing border military standoff in Ladakh since early 2020, and the development of China-Russia relations with the latter as a potentially weakened partner have a major impact on the balancing of interest which India has so far pursued. In addition, India is worried by the fallout of big-power rivalry impacting G20, which India is hosting with much fanfare pushing for its presidency as a sign of its status as an emerging major power at the global stage. China's deteriorating relations with the US have brought its positions on the Ukraine war into question and threaten its relationships with and strategic, diplomatic, and economic interests in Europe. It is in this context that China's peace proposal becomes significant.

This essay critically analyses the significance of China's proposal in terms of its approaches to the Ukraine war, motivations in the context of its relationship with the US and western European countries, as well as Russia, and its efforts to position itself as a responsible power at the global level. It also analyses the Chinese peace plan from an Indian perspective. It argues that China's peace plan is a non-starter for various reasons including its lack of clarity on what and how it wants to achieve an end to the fighting. Nevertheless, Xi Jinping might be aspiring to play a leadership role in a conflict in Europe thereby claiming to profile himself as the leader of a responsible power unlike the US which, according to Chinese narratives, creates conflicts.

Some facts:

The Russia-Ukraine war has entered its second year with no end in sight. This makes the Chinese position untenable due to its close relationship with Russia as well as the European countries and the US combined with its economic and military size. As the war prolongs, it is increasingly becoming difficult for China to maintain its positions on Ukraine.

China's biggest worry at the moment is that European countries may develop fatigue over the war and consequently, that it may drive European countries closer to US positions on Russia, and impact the EU policies towards China negatively. From the very beginning of the war, many Chinese economists and scholars have warned against the potential fragmentation of the international financial order, which will inevitably harm China with regard to its economic goals and global ambitions. Hence, its approach has been to drive a wedge between the European countries and the US so that EU positions do not change drastically, hoping that this will create a time window for China to maneuver through US pressures in advanced technologies and other economic sectors. This has been a consistent focus of China's diplomacy towards western European countries, particularly France and Germany, which hold divergent views on many issues from the US involving Russia and China and wield considerable power within the EU due to their economic, technological, and military power.

Such a policy makes sense because China's approaches to the international order are radically different from Russia. While Russia is economically isolated from the global economy, China is deeply interconnected with the global economy. At the same time, unlike Russia, China has aggressively participated in multilateral institutions and has cultivated economic and diplomatic partnerships across the globe. This creates the huge difference in how Russia and China act when it comes to their approaches to and views of the

international order. Russia's ambitions are primarily to secure its backyard in Eastern Europe and central Asia while attempting to dominate energy and arms markets. Hence, Putin's Russia could take such a decision as to invade Ukraine. In contrast, China's approach focuses on working through and within the international order to make use of it and ultimately dominate it. Hence, a prolonged war in Ukraine is becoming a liability in terms of its global leadership ambitions in the long-term.

Points of special relevance:

The approach taken by China so far is under pressure for the following reasons.

- The US and its partners are trying to isolate China. Now, they are alleging it to even actively considering supporting Russia militarily. Such a possibility, however, will raise the conflict between China and the US to a new level as it will turn China into an actor in the Russia-Ukraine war, which China at this point does not seem to be interested in. In addition, the US may target Chinese companies with sanctions for their economic and energy links with Russia. The US has listed five Chinese companies for their alleged links to the Russian military and industrial complex last week of Feb 2023 in a latest move to put pressure on China. This goes in tandem with increased US pressure on China through stepped up technology control and competition in the economic realm, efforts to recalibrate its alliance in the Indo-Pacific, increasing military support to Taiwan, and diplomatic signaling on the issue, among others.
- As war prolongs, China's efforts to manage its relationship with European countries are also under stress, more so due to US efforts. A prolonged war with Russia nowhere near to claim strategic victory will make Russia more dependent on China. China will prefer a weak Russia to play second fiddle to it; yet this may not

necessarily benefit China. Its balancing act between the European Union and Russia is becoming difficult in the face of a stalemate on the ground between the two sides in the war. From the very beginning of the war, China likely expected, so did Russia, that the war will end in shorter time while giving it a space to drive a wedge between western European countries and the US with respect to the former's autonomy in policies on China. In addition, China was hoping for a strategic setback and dent to US strategic credibility. In China's view, such autonomy for western European countries is not feasible to pursue if the war continues. To the contrary, the war in Ukraine drives European countries close to US positions on Russia making China's efforts to handle its competition with the US difficult. Hence, China has tried hard to convince western European countries about its sincerity and willingness to help end the war while it has hyped up its criticism of the US on Ukraine and its role in international relations as a hegemon and destabilizing power.

- Under criticism from the US and its allies, China also needs to reinforce its efforts to increase its influence in developing countries. In this respect, it faces a competition from India, which has made efforts in recent times to recalibrate its approach to developing countries. The US has attempted to boost its partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region with some success and promised to counter China's economic influence in other parts of the world.
- While China tacitly supports Russia by strengthening its partnership in economic and energy sectors, providing diplomatic support, refraining from calling the Russian military aggression an "invasion or war", and calling the war triggered by the US it is largely compliant on sanctions against Russia. However, this will be difficult to maintain for long. China's fears are now real about the economic

consequences of such sanctions and its economic engagement although it is unlikely that there will be any radical shifts in US policy harming China's economic interests in the global economy. China's economy is heavily inter-dependent with Europe and the US. US efforts to control China's acquisition of advanced technologies like chips and semi-conductors, and the severe negative economic effects of China's harsh "Zero Covid Policy", along with the sluggish recovery from the property market crisis, and reduced demand globally have already put pressure on Chinese policymakers. Thus, China's conflict between its strategic goals and economic interdependence with Europe and the US makes it uneasy with the prolonged war in Ukraine.

India's perspective on China's peace plan can be summarized as follows:

- China's peace plan leads nowhere. Given the position paper was released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, not by Xi Jinping, it was clear that China's plan was just a part of its larger narratives on the Russia-Ukraine war. Its announcement by Xi Jinping himself would have signaled its seriousness to bring the two sides to the table. The plan is a discursive exercise to portray China as a peaceful country aimed at two different sets of countries. One, it signals to European countries that it is willing to contribute to ending the war. It argues implicitly that the US does not want to end the war thereby attempting to portray the US as the main culprit as well as economic and strategic beneficiary of the war. Two, it is a signal to the developing world to reinforce its narratives of China as a responsible power. Chinese policymakers are motivated by a large number of developing countries which do not see the US in a positive light and have not criticized Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

- The Chinese peace plan lacks any concrete suggestions. It is an updated and consolidated version of what China has already said since the war began. The Global Security Initiative announced in March 2022 and official as well as media discourses in China have already included the 12 points mentioned in this peace plan as China's approach to global security and the Russia-Ukraine war.
- Beyond political signaling, the plan is vague and does not take into account the complex reality. Foremost, Chinese unwillingness to condemn Russia for the invasion hinders its credibility as a serious mediator. A cursory look at mediation by third parties in international relations reveals that successful mediators generally address mistakes of both parties in conflict. An acknowledgement that there is a war and both sides need to sit and resolve the conflict is a first step towards resolution. The example of Turkey in the Russia-Ukraine war is illustrative of such efforts. Turkey has been at the forefront of criticizing Russia for the invasion and violation of the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine, yet it made efforts which led to the deal over export of grain. Thus, any serious attempt by any mediator shall involve calling it what it is: a war.
- Indian views of why the Ukraine-Russia war started are informed by the complex nature of Ukraine-Russia relations in the Post-Soviet period including the historical relations between them and the Russia-NATO/US relations in the contemporary period. There is near consensus in the strategic community that the war is a result of big-power politics, which India cannot do much about. Thus, it is a widely accepted view that an end to the war will not come easily due to big-power politics and their conflicting interests and strategies at the regional level in Eurasia and globally. It is here that China's positions may have some impact on how the Indian strategic community as well as official approaches tackle the war and its consequences.
- In addition, it is also acknowledged that international institutions, especially the United Nations (UN), are in crisis and hence, UN bodies like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) are impeded to resolve such conflicts; this view is officially articulated underscoring India's long-held demand that the UNSC must be reformed to make it inclusive of contemporary realities of world politics.
- The ongoing India-China tensions on the border, its worries that a weakened Russia will be closer to China and hence, a negative factor in its military and strategic pursuits due to India's dependence on Russia for military hardware, and its multi-aligned policy to balance both Russia and US and its allies have marked its approaches to the Russia-Ukraine war so far. However, the year 2023 adds another layer to the already complex environment in which India is attempting to balance its interests: India's presidency of G20 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2023. The Ukraine-Russia war has already cast its shadow over the G20. In a period of one week, two crucial meetings of G20, the finance ministers' meeting in Bangalore on Feb 28 and the foreign ministers' meeting on March 3, could not reach a consensus on the joint communiqué due to differences over the Ukraine war. This is a major diplomatic setback for India as the chair. Russia and China both opposed the para that had been part of the Bali communiqué. India's worries are thus accentuated by the spillover of the war on these crucial summits it is organizing. As a result, India is likely to continue balancing Russia, and the US and its partners in the coming year.
- India's presidency of the two organizations in the year 2023 could also open up a space for reorienting the trajectory of

India-China relations. In recent weeks, both sides have kept pragmatic silence and held a round of dialogues between senior representatives calling for the peaceful resolution of the border tensions. However, the border tensions in Ladakh still remain unresolved. Nevertheless, China's newly appointed Foreign Minister Qin Gang's maiden visit to India marked the first high-level contacts between the two sides since April 2022 when the then Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited India. Given that China's president has chances to visit India twice for the SCO and G20 summits in July and September respectively, India-China relations may see a thaw.

This is my view on things

The peace plan raises questions about its feasibility as well as the intentions China reveals in it.

- First and foremost, China has not laid down how it plans to bring the two parties to the table at a time when both sides in the war seem to be hardening their positions on negotiations in comparison to their frequent references to solving it through dialogue in the early months after Feb 2022.
- China's peace plan ignores the ground realities, which are crucial for any peace plan to succeed. These complexities pertain to the question of Ukraine's territories in the east and Crimea.
- The peace plan does not address another thorny question in Ukraine-Russia conflict, i.e. Ukraine's potential status in the NATO.
- A workable peace plan must be inclusive of all parties directly or indirectly involved in the war. In this context, the role of the European Union and countries in Eastern Europe is important even if China is dismissive of the US's role. However, it is unclear what China has done to bring

these players into conversation towards a possible negotiation. Wang Yi's visit to Europe and Russia in the last week of Feb did not divulge any details of such an effort. China's peace plan, therefore, is an exercise in creating favourable discourses criticizing the US and its role in causing troubles and instability in pursuit of its hegemonic position and forming cliques.

- With regard to India, it is getting attention from its US, European, and Quad partners, which allows it to avoid pressure to take clear stand on its energy and military hardware imports from Russia. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's statement after the foreign ministers' meeting on March 2 in New Delhi is a clear signal that the US and its partners do not want to push India for its stand on the Ukraine war reflecting a broader pattern of coordination and cooperation in Indo-Pacific and Quad frameworks. However, the Quad foreign ministers' meeting held on the sidelines of G20 foreign ministers included, for the first time, a para calling for lasting peace in Ukraine and respect for territorial sovereignty and integrity.

In sum, China's peace plan is a non-starter for various reasons including its lack of clarity on what and how it wants to achieve an end to the fighting in concrete terms, but also because of the big-power competition between the US, China and Russia which seems to impede any steps in the direction of peace, and last but not least, because of China's reluctance to acknowledge the ongoing conflict as a war. Nevertheless, Xi Jinping, emboldened by securing his third-term as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC), might be aspiring to play a leadership role in a conflict in Europe thereby claiming to be a responsible power unlike the US which, according to Chinese narratives, create conflicts. While the intentions behind the peace plan remain unclear on such an ambition, domestic discourses on the same do give inkling of them.