

Russia-Ukraine war

The beginning of the end

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After a year of not having much of a policy at all on the war in Ukraine the Chinese government has finally appeared to show an interest in engaging as a peace broker. On the one-year anniversary of the invasion, China’s Foreign Ministry issued a 12-point peace plan, recommending peace talks and calling for a ceasefire.

There are some encouraging points in this ‘draft deal’ including the first, which seemingly suggests that China supports Ukrainian sovereignty. That might just indicate Beijing is pushing Moscow to withdraw its troops from Ukraine. The Chinese plan also condemns using any weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and asks to keep nuclear facilities safe and calls for the preservation of global supply chains and facilitating grain exports. While light on details, these are proposals that would surely win near universal international backing. However, China cannot help itself by then resorting to Western bashing, appearing to blame the West for starting the war given its Cold War mentality. Western governments have reacted with some scepticism to the Chinese pitch questioning why now and, moreover, why Beijing failed to engage with Kyiv around these proposals prior to unveiling them first in Moscow? The Chinese approach in this initiative does seem rather one-sided.

What looks strikingly clear is that President Putin failed to brief his Chinese counterpart on his plans to invade Ukraine. Indeed, the invasion was an unwelcome surprise for Beijing, causing a global cost of living crisis which further complicated President Xi’s domestic political challenges. We believe that China has been key to moderating Russia’s behaviour thus far - no doubt setting red lines for Putin on the use of WMDs, nuclear safety and escalation with NATO. It has leverage, given its economic clout as a major market for Russian commodities, and is increasingly important, given Western sanctions. The hope will be that it will exert maximum pressure on Russia, to eventually get Moscow to the negotiating table. It is notable that despite the affront to Kyiv from China by the lack of prior engagement on the peace plan, President Zelensky did not reject the plan outright and, indeed, has called for a meeting with President Xi.



Equally important, is understanding why China suddenly decided to engage in peace talks at all, after showing little interest for the past year. Our read is that with Russia's latest mobilisation and offensive in Donbas running into the ground – literally in the mud of Bakhmut – China has reached the conclusion that Russia cannot win this war. Indeed, the fear in Beijing is that Putin risks a devastating defeat in Ukraine which could lead to a regime change in Russia. This is a nightmare scenario for Beijing, particularly if a new reform-minded, pro-Western administration emerged in Russia, leaving China effectively encircled. Presumably, giving Putin this off ramp is the motivation for China's attempt to broker the peace plan.

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Broader messaging from China at the recent Munich Security conference, ostensibly threatening to arm Russia, might suggest that Beijing is trying to get the West to also push Ukraine to the negotiating table. As noted, Zelensky has suggested direct talks with Xi but, with preparations for a new Ukrainian counter offensive underway, Kyiv will most likely want to await the conclusion of that before opting to engage in serious peace talks, aiming to start negotiations from a position of strength.

We believe that both sides will attempt to secure whatever military advantage they can over the next few months before we see more substantive peace efforts, perhaps with China taking a more active role at that point. The current consensus, though, is still around a long-haul conflict, possibly lasting years. We would suggest that the successful Ukrainian counter offensives last autumn in Kherson and Kharkhiv still indicate that momentum is on the Ukrainian side, especially as they receive new and better Western military equipment, including the German-made Leopard MBTs. Russia is on the back foot, and the only winner from a long war would be the US which would witness Russia, once a peer rival, see its capability increasingly erode as the conflict continues.

Rationality will eventually see Moscow forced to the negotiating table. Failure to do so will risk slow decline through an extended war in Ukraine or, indeed, the prospect of catastrophic near-term defeat in Ukraine which, as the Chinese move has suggested, could risk a regime change in Moscow. Our take is that this war might actually draw to an end sooner, rather than later, with Moscow accepting the need to withdraw its forces close to positions as of 23 February 2022, or even further, a complete withdrawal from Ukraine.



China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis (24 February 2023)

1. **Respecting the sovereignty of all countries.** Universally recognized international law, including the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, must be strictly observed. The sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries must be effectively upheld. All countries, big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, are equal members of the international community. All parties should jointly uphold the basic norms governing international relations and defend international fairness and justice. Equal and uniform application of international law should be promoted, while double standards must be rejected.
2. **Abandoning the Cold War mentality.** The security of a country should not be pursued at the expense of others. The security of a region should not be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs. The legitimate security interests and concerns of all countries must be taken seriously and addressed properly. There is no simple solution to a complex issue. All parties should, following the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security and bearing in mind the long-term peace and stability of the world, help forge a balanced, effective and sustainable European security architecture. All parties should oppose the pursuit of one's own security at the cost of others' security, prevent bloc confrontation, and work together for peace and stability on the Eurasian Continent.
3. **Ceasing hostilities.** Conflict and war benefit no one. All parties must stay rational and exercise restraint, avoid fanning the flames and aggravating tensions, and prevent the crisis from deteriorating further or even spiraling out of control. All parties should support Russia and Ukraine in working in the same direction and resuming direct dialogue as quickly as possible, so as to gradually deescalate the situation and ultimately reach a comprehensive ceasefire.
4. **Resuming peace talks.** Dialogue and negotiation are the only viable solution to the Ukraine crisis. All efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of the crisis must be encouraged and supported. The international community should stay committed to the right approach of promoting talks for peace, help parties to the conflict open the door to a political settlement as soon as possible, and create conditions and platforms for the resumption of negotiation. China will continue to play a constructive role in this regard.
5. **Resolving the humanitarian crisis.** All measures conducive to easing the humanitarian crisis must be encouraged and supported. Humanitarian operations should follow the principles of neutrality and impartiality, and humanitarian issues should not be politicized. The safety of civilians must be effectively protected, and humanitarian corridors should be set up for the evacuation of civilians from conflict zones. Efforts are needed to increase humanitarian assistance to relevant areas, improve humanitarian conditions, and provide rapid, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access, with a view to preventing a humanitarian crisis on a larger scale. The UN should be supported in playing a coordinating role in channeling humanitarian aid to conflict zones.
6. **Protecting civilians and prisoners of war (POWs).** Parties to the conflict should strictly abide by international humanitarian law, avoid attacking civilians or civilian facilities, protect women, children and other victims of the conflict, and respect the basic rights of POWs. China supports the exchange of POWs between Russia and Ukraine, and calls on all parties to create more favorable conditions for this purpose.
7. **Keeping nuclear power plants safe.** China opposes armed attacks against nuclear power plants or other peaceful nuclear facilities, and calls on all parties to comply with international law including the Convention on Nuclear Safety (CNS) and resolutely avoid man-made nuclear accidents. China supports the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in playing a constructive role in promoting the safety and security of peaceful nuclear facilities.
8. **Reducing strategic risks.** Nuclear weapons must not be used and nuclear wars must not be fought. The threat or use of nuclear weapons should be opposed. Nuclear proliferation must be prevented and nuclear crisis avoided. China opposes the research, development and use of chemical and biological weapons by any country under any circumstances.
9. **Facilitating grain exports.** All parties need to implement the Black Sea Grain Initiative signed by Russia, Türkiye, Ukraine and the UN fully and effectively in a balanced manner, and support the UN in playing an important role in this regard. The cooperation initiative on global food security proposed by China provides a feasible solution to the global food crisis.
10. **Stopping unilateral sanctions.** Unilateral sanctions and maximum pressure cannot solve the issue; they only create new problems. China opposes unilateral sanctions unauthorized by the UN Security Council. Relevant countries should stop abusing unilateral sanctions and "long-arm jurisdiction" against other countries, so as to do their share in deescalating the Ukraine crisis and create conditions for developing countries to grow their economies and better the lives of their people.
11. **Keeping industrial and supply chains stable.** All parties should earnestly maintain the existing world economic system and oppose using the world economy as a tool or weapon for political purposes. Joint efforts are needed to mitigate the spillovers of the crisis and prevent it from disrupting international cooperation in energy, finance, food trade and transportation and undermining the global economic recovery.
12. **Promoting post-conflict reconstruction.** The international community needs to take measures to support post-conflict reconstruction in conflict zones. China stands ready to provide assistance and play a constructive role in this endeavor.



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