

CHINA: Don't count on Beijing to pressure Moscow for peace in Ukraine

- Chinese foreign policy officials have signaled increasing disapproval of Russia's war in Ukraine in recent months and hinted at a potential willingness to pressure Moscow for an end to the war.
- But Beijing's recent shift is probably more rhetorical than substantive, and we doubt that the Chinese government will apply significant pressure on Moscow.
- China's leadership still values Moscow's role as a partner in resisting US hegemony, and even a war-weakened Russia can play this role effectively enough.

In the initial months of the war, Beijing appeared to believe that an ostensibly neutral position on the Ukraine war, paired with vague appeals to principles of national sovereignty and non-intervention, could insulate China from Western criticism. Now, however, China's leadership recognizes that its unwillingness to criticize Moscow directly or to join Western sanctions is viewed as tacit support for the war, increasing previously-reluctant European leaders' willingness to join Washington's [containment agenda](#).

This recognition has led to a shift in diplomatic messaging. At President Xi Jinping's meeting with German chancellor Olaf Scholz in November, Xi offered his clearest criticism of Moscow to date, saying that the international community should "oppose the threat or use of nuclear weapons," according to the official Chinese readout. Xi apparently used similar language in his [meeting](#) with US president Joe Biden two weeks later, according to the US readout, though the Chinese readout from that meeting omitted corresponding language.

In a further sign of the messaging shift, unnamed Chinese officials have told media explicitly in recent weeks that Moscow did not inform Beijing in advance of its invasion plans, despite the "[no limits partnership](#)" that Xi and Russia president Vladimir Putin announced just days before the war began. This claim appears plausible, given that the Chinese government made no effort to evacuate Chinese citizens. These officials have also expressed strong distrust of Putin. Beyond the Chinese leadership's shifting calculation on the Ukraine war, Beijing's tacit criticism of Moscow also reflects a [broader shift](#) in Beijing's broader diplomatic approach in recent months towards a more conciliatory posture.

Some chatter also indicates that the recent demotion of Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng to a role outside the foreign ministry is a sign that Le, as the ministry's top Russia expert, is being blamed for failing to anticipate the war. Prior to his demotion, Le was the highest ranked of four deputy foreign ministers and was rumored to be a leading candidate to succeed Wang Yi as foreign minister, a role that eventually went to former US ambassador Qin Gang.

Rhetorical not substantive

Despite these various signals, Beijing's recent messaging shift is probably more rhetorical than substantive, and we doubt that the Chinese government will apply significant pressure on Putin to end the war. Bloomberg reported last week that the Biden administration recently presented evidence to Beijing that some state-owned enterprises are providing "non-lethal and economic assistance" to Russia that stops short of violating Western sanctions. The credibility of this claim is difficult to assess absent further detail, but public data shows that China's trade with Russia hit a record high last year.

Since the war began, Chinese leaders have sought to perform an awkward straddle, echoing some of Russia's justifications for the war and criticizing Western sanctions in principle, while also obeying the sanctions in practice and calling for peace. Though mostly unconvincing to Western leaders and publics, this straddle remains the least bad option from Beijing's perspective. Beijing still values Moscow's role as a partner in resisting US hegemony, and while Chinese leaders do not want to ally themselves with a losing cause, even a somewhat weakened Russia can still play this role effectively enough. In fact, in some respects Beijing may prefer a weaker Russia, which would become even more subservient on China.

To be sure, Chinese officials' professed disdain for Putin and the Russian state is probably genuine. The two governments have a long history of distrust dating back to the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s. As [previously discussed](#), the two countries also compete for influence in Central Asia and the Western Balkans. Apart from shared hostility towards Washington, the two governments have relatively few shared interests, but this key point of alignment will be enough to avoid a clear break for the foreseeable future.

[Client Portal >>](#)

Gabriel Wildau
Managing Director
+1 (347) 714-4962
gabriel.wildau@teneo.com

© 2023 Teneo. All rights reserved. This material was produced by Teneo for use solely by the recipient. This communication is intended as general background research and is not intended to constitute advice on any particular commercial investment or trade matter or issue and should not be relied upon for such purposes. The views expressed here represent opinions as of this date and are subject to change without notice. The information has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable but no guarantees can be given as to its accuracy, completeness or reliability. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the prior consent of Teneo.