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China at a Crossroads: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Chinese Diplomacy

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Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine could not have been predicted in the realism of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The firm Sino-Russian ties that the CCP had thought the countries were demonstrating to the world, a partnership that is an indispensable asset in competing with the United States, has turned into a liability that could seriously damage its own credibility. Russia's aggression has been condemned by the overwhelming majority of the world's countries, and Chinese diplomacy found itself suddenly at a crossroads. Xi Jinping nevertheless endorsed Putin's war and the Chinese government has not labelled the 'special military action' an act of aggression.

China has yet to decide in which direction to proceed. Even at this juncture, it has stated that it will advance its strategic partnership with Russia, while advocating respect for and maintenance of the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of countries and calling for peaceful methods to resolve disputes. China faces the predicament of being stuck in self-contradiction, easing one foot forward and then pulling it back, in the end finding itself unable to move anywhere.

Xi Jinping favours Putin in Beijing

The greater context for Chinese diplomacy is the intensifying strategic competition with the US. The opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics on February 4th was held in a China much richer than the one that had hosted the Beijing Summer Olympics 14 years earlier. The opening of the Winter Olympics was supposed to be an opportunity to show the world how Chinese society had matured in some respects and a stage for international acclaim to boost public confidence and support for the

regime ahead of the Party Congress in the autumn. However, in protest against the Xi Jinping administration's crackdown on human rights, countries such as the US, UK and Canada announced a diplomatic boycott; unlike in 2008, many major countries did not send their heads of state to the opening ceremony.

Under these circumstances, in flew President Vladimir Putin, the leader of an undisputed major power. The Russian team, found to have been systematically doping, was not officially allowed to compete in the Games. As at the Tokyo Olympics the previous year, however, the Russian athletes participated under the name of the Russian Olympic Committee, with Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 being played in lieu of the Russian national anthem. Putin's attendance at the opening ceremony was made possible by a special invitation from Xi Jinping.

That was not the only special treatment accorded Putin. Summit meetings with other leaders were held with masks, but the picture of Xi Jinping and Putin side by side that appeared prominently on the front page of the People's Daily showed neither of them wearing masks. The joint Sino-Russian statement issued after the summit was a lengthy 15-page A4 document in English defending their countries' political systems and calling for a better approach to international relations in the new multipolar era. On Sino-Russian relations, it contained the following striking passage: "[The two countries] reaffirm that the new inter-State relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era. Friendship between the two States has no limits, [and] there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation". The effectiveness of this statement was quickly tested over Ukraine.

Xi Jinping trusted Putin more than Biden

US intelligence agencies knew exactly what Russia was planning to do with Ukraine. According to reports from the New York Times and elsewhere, the US had passed that information on to China. It was also reported that Chinese diplomatic officials asked the Russians not to attack during the Olympics, although the Chinese deny this. What Putin said to Xi Jinping at the summit on February 4th is not known in detail. However, it does not appear that a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which would later become a reality, was mentioned despite claims of a 'friendship with no limits'. While foreigners in Ukraine began streaming out of the country, China made no preparations to evacuate its own citizens.

However, the situation gradually became more urgent, and China's attitude began to waver. Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who attended the Munich Security Conference online on February 19th, said that the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of countries should be respected and maintained, as this is a fundamental principle of international relations embodying the spirit of the UN Charter and a principled position that China has consistently upheld. He added that "Ukraine is no exception". According to press reports, the US continued to provide China with information on Russia's combat readiness. As tension mounted along the Ukrainian border might be expected, Wang Yi may have thought it better to set up a perimeter to defend the consistency of China's position.

There appears to have been no prior notification from the Russian side of subsequent developments, including the recognition of the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk in eastern Ukraine. That is probably why Wang Yi said at the same meeting that "as I understand it, both Russia and the EU support the Minsk agreements". Meanwhile, the Chinese side continued to criticise the US for "raising tensions, manufacturing panic and exaggerating the war".

However, on February 24th, Russia launched an invasion. At a Foreign Ministry press conference on the same day, spokesperson Hua Chunying was asked 13 times whether she recognised Russia's action as an invasion, but she never conceded this. The prevailing view is that Putin believed in a blitzkrieg victory; on the 26th, the state-run Novosti News Agency issued a declaration of victory, stating that Ukraine has returned to Russia. The day before, in the afternoon of February 25th, a telephone conversation between Putin and Xi Jinping took place. There are interesting divergences in the respective Chinese and Russian announcements on this meeting. According to the Xinhua News Agency, Putin said that the US and NATO had ignored Russia's reasonable security concerns, repeatedly dishonoured their commitments, advanced their military deployment eastwards and challenged Russia's strategic bottom line. Xi Jinping said he supported Russia resolving its issues with Ukraine through negotiations.

According to the website of the Russian Embassy in Beijing, Putin gave details of his decision to recognise the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic and to engage in a special military action to protect civilians from genocide, among other things. Xi stressed that he respected the actions adopted by the Russian leadership to deal with the crisis at hand (emphasis added). Xi thus endorsed the use of force by Russia. As a result, China found itself in a difficult diplomatic position.

Continued fighting and China's deteriorating position

On the morning of February 26th(JST), half a day after the Sino-Russian summit call, a resolution condemning Russia was put to the UN Security Council, and China abstained. In Ukraine, Russian troops invading across the border from the north, east and south were met with strong resistance and their advance stalled. On March 2nd, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling on Russia to suspend its military operations in Ukraine and withdraw its troops. There were 141 countries in favour, five against (Belarus, North Korea, Eritrea, Russia and Syria) and 35 abstentions, including China, India and South Africa.

The National People's Congress (NPC) opened in China on March 5th. It is customary that the deliberations focus on domestic issues such as the economy and society, with foreign policy not being an important agenda item. Nevertheless, it can be said that the 'Chinese common sense' of making no mention of the war in Ukraine in the Government Work Report was unusual and defied 'the world's common sense'. Several questions about Ukraine were naturally raised at the annual foreign ministerial press conference held during the NPC. Foreign Minister Wang Yi never gave a direct answer to a Reuters reporter's questions about why he still did not call Russia's move an invasion and whether he is concerned that China's international standing would be damaged by refusing to condemn Russia.

He was forced to offer the lame explanation that the reasons the Ukraine situation had developed into what it was now were complex and complicated, and that adding fuel to the fire and intensifying contradictions was not an advisable approach to resolving these complex issues. Then, perhaps to deflect criticism, he said: 'I hereby declare that the Chinese Red Cross Society will provide Ukraine with emergency humanitarian aid as soon as possible'. When asked by a Russian journalist about Sino-Russian relations, however, Wang Yi replied that China and Russia are each other's most important and close neighbour and strategic partner, and that they will tirelessly advance their all-round strategic cooperation partnership in the new era.

From the way things have unfolded so far, the following at least can be said about Chinese diplomacy. The Chinese did not believe that Putin would make a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. According to the aforementioned Novosti News Agency's 'declaration of victory' article, which had probably been distributed erroneously, Russia had not only challenged the West, but had also demonstrated that the era of Western global domination was fully and finally over. Given the pragmatic rationality of the Chinese Communist Party, it is inconceivable that it would go to war from such resentment. Unlike Russia, which is also competing with the US but has slipped from superpower status, China, which has run up the hill, so to speak, is a bright challenger, at least for the moment.

Once the invasion began, though, Xi Jinping endorsed Putin's decision. The first consideration was the strategic importance of relations with Russia. In essence, he decided that the most important thing for China was to win the strategic competition with the US, and that partnership with Russia was essential for this.

How great will the cost be? The Sino-Russian joint statement emphasising compliance with the UN Charter faded away in an instant. It became clear that China, while advocating for the principles of sovereignty, independence and respect for and maintenance of territorial integrity, did not actually apply them to Ukraine. The mismatch between words and deeds was exposed in broad daylight, and China lost credibility. Things may not stop there, however. Russia has been subjected to massive economic sanctions in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine. If the Putin regime sinks into the abyss at the bottom of the hill, how much damage will the Xi Jinping regime suffer? In the run-up to the autumn Party Congress, Xi Jinping is faced with a major unforeseen risk.