

Beijing's Reaction to Ukraine Crisis: Divergence From Principled Foreign Policy?- Abdurrahim Sağır



Adoption of a new diplomatic framework titled 'Major Power Diplomacy' at the 17th Party congress has been a milestone for Chinese diplomacy.[\[i\]](#)

Chinese foreign policy (CFP) entered a transition period where Beijing was ready to abandon 'developing country' identity and appear as a 'responsible major power'. Ever since, reflections of a new way of strategic thinking in Beijing has been evident in policy outputs.

While this gradual change was taking place in CFP, Chinese leadership took every opportunity to confirm their adherence to the guiding principles of Chinese diplomacy. The innovative features of Xi Jinping's foreign policy were added to

solid foundation of CFP tradition. Therefore, an adequate evaluation of the gradual change in CFP calls for a reading in the context of Chinese diplomacy. This piece offers a reading of China's reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine with adding core principles of CFP into the perspective. In this regard, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping's contributions to Chinese diplomacy will be briefly highlighted to draw a basic framework for Chinese diplomacy tradition. The focus of the paper will be on Beijing's divergence from its traditional attitude by offering political and economic support to Moscow.

People's Republic of China's (PRC) Diplomacy Tradition

Introduced by Zhou Enlai, the first premier of China, in 1958, "The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" could be regarded as foundation stones of PRC's diplomacy. [These principles are](#); 'mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity', 'non-aggression', 'non- interference in each other's internal affairs', 'equality and mutual benefit', and 'peaceful coexistence'. These principles are underpinning Chinese diplomacy for the last 65 years. Among five, Beijing places special emphasis on territorial integrity and national sovereignty. Beijing's policy on Syrian crisis was built upon these two principles. Despite all the international pressure, Beijing -together with Moscow- provided a security umbrella for Assad regime at UNSC by issuing [9 vetoes](#) for "protecting Syria's territorial integrity".

Deng Xiaoping, paramount leader of PRC, has been another leader that has left his personal influence on Chinese diplomacy. He managed to alter struggle-centered ideological world view in Beijing. Peace and development was "the current theme of the international affairs" according to Deng.[\[ii\]](#) Within this context, 'non-alignment' principle and 'keeping a low profile' strategy have been his most salient contributions that become to be core principles of Chinese diplomacy. Non-alignment principle enabled Chinese leaders to refrain from forming alliances with loads of long-term commitments and responsibilities. Instead, Beijing developed a strategy of building flexible partnerships across the world. Keeping a low-profile strategy on the other hand, was suggesting maintaining a low profile in international affairs. The strategy was aimed at

focusing on its development while presenting a benign image to the world as a status quo power. In practical terms these principles have facilitated Chinese government to avoid political confrontations and focus on its development goals.

Beijing's Reactions to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Evaluation of Beijing's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in this context, indicates abandonment of some of the core principles of Chinese diplomacy. Given the degree of emphasis placed on sovereignty and territorial integrity for decades, China's reaction could be regarded as 'unusual'. At the initial phases of the crisis, Chinese diplomats have refrained from making any references to Ukraine's sovereignty or territorial integrity. [On February 24](#), after being asked if China considers Russia's action as an invasion, Foreign Ministry spokesperson described the situation as a result of "complex historical background" and "interplay of various factors". Chinese government choose to frame the Russian attacks as "Russia's special military operation" which also reflected in the coverages of Chinese media outlets.

Considering China's firm stance on protecting Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Beijing's attitude towards Ukraine raises questions about the Beijing's principled foreign policy behaviors. Beijing is simultaneously displaying two different attitudes towards the two ongoing crises. In this regard, selective application of 'respect for sovereignty' principle is likely to lead to questioning of 'responsible major power' image that Beijing has been eagerly trying to establish under Xi Jinping's leadership.

Another point that deserves attention is the nature of relationship between China and Russia. Chinese government has always been clear that Sino-Russia relation is a strategic partnership not an alliance. However, Xi-Putin meeting at the 2022 Winter Olympics marked escalation of relations to a further level. [In the joint statement](#) running over 5000 words long, two countries emphasized their shared world view and declared that there are "no limits" to the two's "friendship" and

“no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation.” The two countries endorsed each other’s security concerns such as expansion of NATO or AUKUS. Another significant outcome of the meeting was China’s pledge to purchase 117.5 billion worth of the Russian gas and oil, which have strengthened Putin’s hand in the face economic sanctions. Chinese foreign ministry also [underlined](#) that “China firmly opposes any form of unilateral sanctions.”

In the context of both sides’ increased dissatisfaction with the US-led order and their confrontation with the US, this meeting can be interpreted as escalation of bilateral ties further than partnership relations. In fact, many Western analysts viewed the joint statement as a “[landmark document](#)” which is a declaration of a “[de facto security alliance](#)”. This might be an execration for the moment, but Beijing’s covert support for the Russian actions should not be underseen. Beijing’s political and economic support for Moscow at such a crucial time is not a usual practice in Chinese diplomacy. After abstaining from [UN resolution](#) condemning Russian invasion of Ukraine on 25 February, China issued sole supporting vote for Russia’s resolution on [24 March](#). Following the discovery of civilian bodies at the town of Bucha, Beijing once again refrained from naming or criticizing the perpetrator. Despite the tense international criticism against Moscow, [Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson](#) called to “exercise restraint and avoid unfounded accusations” until the full picture is clear. At the General Assembly vote on [7April](#), China voted against the resolution for suspending Russia from UN Human Rights Council.

Given Beijing’s longstanding emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity, these compromises are overperforming the level of commitment expected in a partnership relation. Beijing’s actions are resembling more of backing up an ally who is facing international backlash. And both parties shared threat perception of the US and their sufferings from unilateral sanctions makes this rapprochement more spontaneous. Although China and Russia do not share the exact same vision for the future of international order and there are potential sources of conflict between the two, recent developments are creating favorable incentives for the emergence of a Russia-China axis.

Overall, China's support for the Russian aggression would potentially jeopardize Xi Jinping's global governance vision of "[building a community of shared future for all humankind](#)". Despite the embracive narratives of the Chinese government on global governance, refraining from taking any measures against the perpetrator in an international crisis will lead to questionings at the international stage. Reflections of these actions will stay as warning notice especially for the developing world that is in expectance of a principled, value-driven foreign policy approach from China. As Josep Borrell, the European Union's high representative for foreign affairs, [stated](#) recently "China cannot pretend to be a responsible great power but close its eyes or cover its ears when it comes to a conflict that obviously makes it uncomfortable..."

[\[i\]](#) For further reading; Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Views of Foreign Policy in the 19th Party Congress," China Leadership Monitor No:55 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018

[\[ii\]](#) Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Vol. III, p. 104 in Honghua Men, "China's grand strategy: a framework analysis" Singapore, Peking University Press and Springer, 2020



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