

Is China a credible mediator for the Russia-Ukraine war?

LUCAS CAVALCANTI DOS SANTOS

“Do we agree with everything in [China’s plan]? No. However, it shows a will to play a responsible role and try to build a pathway to peace” - French President Emmanuel Macron, April 5th, 2023.(ABBOUD; WHITE, 2023)

Introduction

As the US accuses China of siding with Russia in the Ukraine war and placing itself on the “wrong side of history” (AFP, 2022), the world watches Washington and its allies send ever more powerful weapons to Kyiv, increasing risks of escalation. In this context, with the two biggest nuclear powers involved, directly or indirectly, in the war, China emerges as a potential broker for a negotiated solution. But is China a credible mediator?

Escalation

In March 2023, Germany sent advanced Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, marking a strong shift in its policy of not sending offensive weapons to countries at war (OLTERMANN, 2023). Poland also offered to send its MiG-29 fighter jets (MORTENSEN et al., 2023). Even more dangerous, though, was the United Kingdom’s recent confirmation that it’s supplying Ukraine with Storm Shadow missiles, with a range of 250 km, more than three times the range of Himars, sent by the US (GREGORY, 2023). This signals a clear trend of escalation, since Kyiv receives not only weapons for defending its territory, but also equipment able to strike deep within Russia’s borders.

For Morgan (2008), escalation can be defined as the intensification of conflict that overcomes previous limits mutually recognized by the parties. Furthermore, he argues writes that to manage the risks of escalation, it is crucial to understand how the adversary will perceive and interpret events that have not yet occurred, and to see the world

through the enemy's eyes. Therefore, it doesn't matter too much if NATO genuinely believed it didn't pose a risk to Russian security as it incorporated new more members towards East Europe. NATO still committed a blunder by overlooking that, from Moscow's perspective, its expansion was indeed an existential threat.

Therefore, NATO was partially to blame for the escalation that ultimately led to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. And contrary to the dominant Western discourse which denies any responsibility for such escalation, blaming solely Vladimir Putin, Stephen M. Walt (2022) argues that to explain why something bad happened is not to defend it. To say that Russia invaded Ukraine in part because of NATO's expansion is not to say the aggression is right or reasonable. To deny that the West has part of the blame is to deny common sense and history (WALT, 2022). The question is: will NATO realize its mistake and correct course? Or will it throw gas on the fire and risk worsening the crisis? [Very interesting and well argued paragraph.]

After the invasion, during the first year of the conflict, Western countries had been hesitant to send Ukraine arms with offensive potential beyond its territory, in fear of escalation that could cause a spill over of the war, bringing NATO face to face with Russia. However, as noted above, this changed with the pledge and supply of advanced offensive equipment, including tanks, fighter jets, and long range cruise missiles. In this scenario, China published a mediation proposal, which I will attempt to unpack below. The aim is to understand its scope and how Beijing views a possible way out of the conflict.

China as a mediator: how does Beijing envision peace?

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China published the country's "Official position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis" on February 24, 2023 (MFA, 2023). It consists of a 12-point document. The first one, perhaps the most important, entails "respecting the sovereignty of all countries" (ibid.). In agreement with international customary law, China emphasizes that sovereignty is a leading value upon which a negotiated solution must be built. Ukraine was invaded by Russia, therefore, a political solution will require Russia to withdraw from Ukraine. This is a sensitive topic for Beijing as territorial integrity and sovereignty is a core principle of Chinese

international relations, which is especially relevant regarding the Taiwan issue.

Second, China emphasizes that one's security cannot be pursued through risking another's security. Expanding military blocs is not the way to achieve peace in Europe (ibid.). It's safe to say that China opposes NATO's expansion, as it, in the name of its members' security, puts Russia under threat. And security interests of all sides, not only one, must be accounted for. China understands this is a complex matter with no simple solution, and requires cooperation from all sides.

Third, China opposes the war, and urges restraint from all parties in order to resume talks for a ceasefire and avoid escalation. Fourth, China's position is that the only viable solution for the crises is a negotiated one (ibid.).

Fifth, China emphasizes the need for a coordinated humanitarian action to relieve human suffering through evacuation of civilians, unimpeded humanitarian access and aid. China supports the UN for this role. It's important for such issues to not be politicized and the efforts to remain as neutral as possible (ibid.). We can assume that the Chinese perspective is that politicization in this case only creates obstacles for humanitarian action and prevents the relief of suffering as both parties will refuse measures that could come with big political costs, i.e., politicized. By politicized, I mean the instrumentalization of human suffering within political propaganda by either side.

If one fears that, by allowing unrestricted humanitarian aid, the information collected there could be used by the enemy in accusations of war crimes, it follows that humanitarian aid will be restricted. The accusations might be true or false. It doesn't matter. A simple rational calculation favors blocking humanitarian aid if such aid is perceived to fuel the enemy's propaganda. This is why it's important to avoid instrumentalizing it to villainize the other side, because doing so creates obstacles for relieving human suffering through humanitarian operations.

Item 7 urges all parties to protect women, children and other victims of the conflict, including prisoners of war. On item 8, China emphasizes the need to keep nuclear facilities safe in order to prevent nuclear accidents. Parties should thus abide by international law, including the Convention on Nuclear Safety (CNS), with the International Atomic Energy Agency playing an important role. China states its opposition to the use of nuclear weapons and also

emphasizes that it opposes, in any circumstances, for any reason and by anyone, the research, development and use of chemical and biological weapons (ibid.).

Ninth, China proposes the Black Sea Grain Initiative consisting of Russia, Turkey, Ukraine and the UN to facilitate grain exports and alleviate the food crisis. Tenth, China opposes the use of unilateral sanctions not authorized by the UNSC as maximum pressure only makes things worse, not better, by increasing chances of escalation and hurting developing countries. On item 11, it urges all parties to oppose weaponizing the world economy in order to prevent [spillover?] pillovers and enable a faster recovery of the global economy. Finally, China offers assistance to rebuild the conflict zones after the crisis, and invited the international community for joint efforts in this sense (ibid.).

Will China succeed?

Chinese mediation faces substantial challenges. Han (2023) argues that one such obstacle is the perception that Beijing could align with Moscow against the West. Critics argue that, despite urging respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, China has not yet condemned Russia nor demanded the withdrawal of troops from the Ukraine territory, raising questions about a “pro-Russia neutrality” (HILLE; YU, 2022).

According to Han, this skepticism may be overlooking Xi Jinping’s diplomatic ambition. He writes that — considering the competition for prestige versus the US, the Taiwan issue, and the successful Chinese mediation that restored diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran (HUBBARD; BENGALI, 2023) in March — China might actually seek another big diplomatic victory. For Han, this outcome is coherent with Beijing’s foreign policy for it would reinforce China’s image as a responsible power.

But will China succeed? Probably yes. It is the sole major power making any serious attempt to pursue a negotiated solution. As economic, humanitarian, and political costs of prolonging the war rise, and the risks of escalation become more visible, China’s efforts will become increasingly attractive. At the tipping point, support for Ukraine will decline, and its ability to resist Russia’s war machine will decay, prompting Kyiv to the negotiation table. One thing is for sure: there will be no winners.

Referências

ABBOUD, L.; WHITE, E. Xi Jinping to face European pressure over support for Russia in Ukraine war. *Financial Times*, 5 abr. 2023.

AFP. US says China's support for Russia over Ukraine puts it on 'wrong side of history'. *The Guardian*, 15 jun. 2022.

GREGORY, J. UK confirms supply of Storm Shadow long-range missiles in Ukraine. *BBC News*, 11 maio 2023.

HAN, Y. H. Mediating the Russia-Ukraine war: China enters the ring. Disponível em: <<http://www.thinkchina.sg/mediating-russia-ukraine-war-china-enters-ring>>. Acesso em: 7 maio. 2023.

HILLE, K.; YU, S. Xi pursues policy of 'pro-Russia neutrality' despite Ukraine war. *Financial Times*, 27 fev. 2022.

HUBBARD, B.; BENGALI, S. Answers to 7 Key Questions on the Saudi-Iran Deal. *The New York Times*, 10 mar. 2023.

MFA. China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis. Disponível em: <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html>. Acesso em: 7 maio. 2023.

MORTENSEN, A. et al. Poland MiG-29: Warsaw becomes first NATO member to pledge fighter jets to Ukraine | CNN. Disponível em: <<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/16/europe/poland-fighter-jets-ukraine-intl/index.html>>. Acesso em: 15 maio. 2023.

OLTERMANN, P. German Leopard 2 tanks now in Ukraine, Berlin confirms. *The Guardian*, 28 mar. 2023.

WALT, S. M. The Perpetually Irrational Ukraine Debate. Disponível em: <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/29/the-perpetually-irrational-ukraine-debate/>>. Acesso em: 6 maio. 2023.