

China and the Crisis of the European Security System

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If there had not been an active rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing over the past decades, there would have been no Asian alternative to the European markets for Russian oil and gas, and nothing would have happened on February 24. But is China the main beneficiary of the European crisis? Is the situation developing according to the Chinese plan?

There are different ways to assess the nature and consequences of the events that began in mid-February 2022. However, the following

is obvious: they cannot be assessed in isolation from the historical context, which should include, at a minimum, the last eight years, starting from the overthrow of the Yanukovich government but in reality covering the entire period of the post-bipolar world order.

It is impossible to reduce them to merely relations between Russia and Ukraine. The situation in Ukraine was the result of the fact that after the end of the Cold War the countries of the Euro-Atlantic bloc did not want to create a comprehensive security system on the continent which would include Russia (Trenin, 2018). Now, most of the countries of the world have been drawn into the current conflict and its economic aspects in one way or another. Of course, China is no exception. Moreover, in a situation where Russia's foes have employed tactics such as "canceling" the country and severing economic and humanitarian ties, the Chinese factor has turned out to be a key one (Savchenko and Zuenko, 2020, p. 122).

Of course, if there had not been an active rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing over the past decades, there would have been no Asian alternative to the European markets for Russian oil and gas, and nothing would have happened on February 24. At the same time, if China had not taken the position of benevolent neutrality with respect to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine and had not continued to buy Russian goods and provide a reliable strategic rearguard, no continuation of "February 24" would objectively have happened.

But is China the main beneficiary of the European crisis? Is the situation developing according to the Chinese plan? For me, the answer is obviously "no."

The current development of events was not desirable for China and does not meet its interests. China itself is convinced that perhaps the only party that will now benefit is Washington—which it calls the "warmonger" (Zhang and Wan, 2022).

The imbalance of international stability allows the United States to establish new rules of the game in relations with its allies, sell them even more oil and weapons and thereby strengthen its global hegemony.

The consolidation of the “collective West,” based on the imaginary dichotomy of the “confrontation between democracy and authoritarianism” (Brands, 2018) (effectively, a “battle between Good and Evil”), harms China’s interests as it cuts off its path to normalizing relations with the United States, which are beneficial to Beijing for purely economic reasons. It also reduces China’s room for maneuver in Europe, which is a key market for Chinese goods. And this is in addition to the sharp rise in energy and food prices which are necessary for the stable development of the Chinese economy (Zuenko, 2022a).

In general, the conflict has made things more difficult for China. In recent years, the country has been preparing for the fact that sooner or later its natural ambitions for the role of one of the world leaders (the concept of the “Chinese Dream”) will have to be backed by muscle-flexing (Kashin, 2015). Economic pressure, anti-Chinese sanctions, and aggressive rhetoric from Western leaders over the past five years have simply left the Chinese no choice but to prepare for a future war, whether it is a “hybrid war” or traditional “trench warfare.” However, events have moved too quickly, and now Beijing does not feel ready enough to take decisive action as Moscow did. Moreover, China thinks that time is on its side, and Beijing’s task is to keep a neutral position for as long as possible, building up strength and hoping for a weakening of competitors.

Euro-Atlantic capitals also understand this and have stepped up geopolitical pressure on China. The idea of “indivisibility of security in the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific region” has already appeared in their rhetoric, which actually implies the creation of a “global NATO.” From the European security perspective, the crisis is truly becoming a global one (The Frontier Post, 2022).

In practice, a “global NATO” is already being created, and the Madrid summit in late June testifies to that. For the first time in NATO’s history, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea were invited to attend. Measures have been intensified to form “quasi-alliances” such as QUAD (the Quadripartite Security Dialogue of the USA, Australia, Japan, and

India) and AUKUS (tripartite pact of Australia, the UK, and the U.S.) and, finally, Partners in the Blue Pacific (AUKUS plus Japan and New Zealand). In contrast to the “classical NATO,” which for a long time was perceived by China as a vestige of the Cold War and intra-Western conflicts (Sun, 2018, p. 22), these alliances are unequivocally anti-Chinese (Marlow, 2021).

In response, China is trying to launch a network of partnerships with the island states of Oceania (Perry, 2022). However, there has been almost no success in this respect so far, and even a security agreement with the Solomon Islands, as it appears, does not involve the construction of a Chinese naval base (Ng, 2022). In other words, China has no other serious military-political partners in the Pacific except Russia (Kashin, 2019).

Meanwhile, U.S. President Joe Biden’s visit to East Asia in May has expectedly launched a new round of tensions in the region (French, 2022). Taiwan again acted as a “red rag for the bull”—a de facto independent island, whose return to a united China has been a historical task of the Chinese leadership. Therefore, it should be obvious to Beijing that the situation is not confined to pressure on Russia, which has crossed the “red lines” (Ellyatt, 2022), but that there may be some clear “red lines” set with regard to China’s behavior, and that “non-crossing” of them will be a guarantee against interference in its internal affairs.

China should also understand that Washington’s end goal is to systemically curb Beijing’s very ability to exercise its sovereignty as it sees fit.

The pressure on China will be persisting. There is a large number of “pain points” which the so-called “world community” can complain about to the PRC: Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, the rights of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, labor migrants, political opposition, greenhouse gas emissions, lack of democratic elections, and possible victory of a “wrong candidate” (even if such elections are introduced), and so on ad infinitum.

Therefore, in fact, there is no “dilemma of choice” that Chinese experts speak of (Zuenko, 2022c). Amid Western statements that “China is a systemic threat to NATO’s interests, security and values” (Qin and Ramzy, 2022), a return to the model of relations between the globalized “Western world” and a globalizing China, which existed until the mid-2010s, is simply impossible with Beijing’s current authorities.

They can only delay the final break as much as possible, maintaining the partnership with Russia, rebuilding the economy, building up military and political potential, and waiting for the West to swallow its own problems. As Silvio Berlusconi (2022) rightly noted in his recent essay, “Russia is isolated from the West, but the West is isolated from the rest of the world”; by the “world” he meant the vast “Third world” (incidentally, echoing Mao Zedong (1974)), which is increasingly getting annoyed with the fact that it again has to suffer from a “European war.”¹

This, in fact, constitutes China’s fundamental interest amid the current crisis. The end goal of China’s ruling Communist Party, according to the effective policy documents, is to build a communist society. Communism, that is, a society where all property is communally-owned, is still far away, but there are plans to construct a “developed socialist state” by 2049—the year when the Peoples Republic of China will celebrate its centenary. The formation of such a state, according to the ideologists of the Communist Party, is possible only in a multipolar world, in which none of the countries dictates the rules of the game to others, and these rules may be worked out through mutual compromise, on the basis of “sovereign equality” (Jin and Lin, 2019) as is written in the UN Charter.

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¹ See, for example, comments by Samir Saran, Indian expert of the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) at the Davos panel “The Russia-Ukraine War: Do the West and the Rest Disagree?” Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=1C8wspuji7U [Accessed 26 July 2022].

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