

March 6, 2022

Thoughts on Implications of Ukraine Invasion for China

By Dr. Thomas Fingar (Shorenstein APARC Fellow, Stanford University)

Moscow, and especially Beijing, have made a bigger deal of their new relationship than it warrants because both have delusions of using it to gain leverage with the US in a recreation of the "strategic triangle" that was said to exist after Nixon's trip to China 50 years ago. Nixon's goal and accomplishment were terrific, but the idea that it gave Beijing or Moscow greater leverage in dealing with each other or with us proved much less significant in reality than it was in reams of Kissinger statements and globaloney writings by academics. That Xi and Putin would attempt to depict the current relationship in a way most advantageous to them is not surprising, and there are plenty of handwringers ready--even eager--to depict it as more important than it is. I think the characterization of an Aussie Foreign Service officer is still apt. He called the relationship "an axis of convenience."

Putin's invasion of Ukraine has put China in a very difficult position. Xi cannot criticize his good buddy Putin without appearing to be foolish and a dupe while at the same time undercutting the ballyhooed relationship that is a centerpiece of his policies to push back against the US and the West. But saying essentially nothing exposes the hyperbole--if not hypocrisy--of Beijing's long-standing positions on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference. This is made worse by the way in which Putin "recognized" the independence of the two eastern provinces as legitimate separatist states before invading in the west. For Beijing, that has terrible implications for separatist movements in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan. Putin/Russia has just done something they repeatedly declare cannot be allowed to happen. Another consequence for Beijing is that refusal to condemn Russia and its votes at the United Nations (veto in the UN Security Council and abstention in the UN General Assembly) make a mockery of its "strategic partnership" with Ukraine. China has lots of "strategic partnerships" and "comprehensive strategic partnerships" with all kinds of countries. Events have proven them to be completely worthless.

The final observation I'll add here is that Beijing must be reeling from the way that Europe and the US have held together. PRC policies both assume and seek to exploit differences within the EU and between the EU and the US. Unanimity must come as a disconcerting shock. And if it happened here, is it prudent to keep telling themselves that Europe would sit on its hands in a Taiwan contingency? Even more to the point, they have to be struck and puzzled by what is being done under the label of NATO. NATO as a defensive military alliance has no obvious or explicit role in non-member Ukraine. But we are witnessing NATO acting as an alliance of shared values willing to pay high costs to defend those values even beyond its own territory. Japan, Switzerland, Sweden, and Finland, among others, appear to be acting as de facto members of this new-type "alliance." Oft-asserted conviction that China could easily withstand the disorganized, incomplete, and probably short-lived sanctions imposed by a US-led coalition must be

rethought in Beijing. And those who espoused this view in the leadership must be squirming.

Actually, I do have one more point before ending this overly long note. I think the way in which Biden used multiple meetings at multiple levels to share intelligence on Putin's build-up and plans was brilliant. Doing so demonstrated a willingness to work with the PRC on what should be a shared concern. The US provided information that enabled/forced Beijing to confront the fact that Putin either lied to them or told Xi some variant of the truth. This essentially told China that he (Putin) didn't care about their concerns. By keeping the talks and intelligence sharing secret until after the invasion, the US cannot be accused of trying to put pressure on or embarrass Beijing. By publicizing them after the fact, it forces Xi to explain to others in the leadership--and to the Chinese people--why he didn't do anything about what he was told and Xi cannot claim that China was surprised by what happened.

Fingar Thoughts on Ukraine-China 3-06-22