

What China really thinks about Ukraine

What does China really think about Ukraine? That question has been nagging away at Ukrainian minds — as well as their supporters in the West.

Some may have hoped to get answers at the recently held, and grandly named, World Peace Forum (WPF) in Beijing — an annual event first launched in 2012, with goal of demonstrating that China can contribute to solving problems of war and peace on a global level. But Western observers at the conference were surprised to find Ukraine had instead been relegated to the forum's marginalia, and were disappointed that the only guests talking about Ukraine were Russians — as it appeared no Ukrainians had been invited.

However, to those studying China's evolving position, this shouldn't have come as a surprise. In addition to attending the WPF, we spent the last 18 months conducting dozens of interviews with Chinese thinkers and strategists from top universities, think tanks and party-affiliated organizations, trying to understand the country's thinking on the war in Ukraine. And what we found is that although there's lively debate on the matter — more than one would perhaps expect — the Chinese are thinking about it very differently from the West.

First, for China, the war in Ukraine simply isn't that important. It's seen through a big-picture lens — not as a cataclysmic war that's reshaping the global order, but as a proxy conflict between China and the United States. Crucially, many believe America is using the war to try and encircle China, pointing to how Japan and Korea imposed sanctions on Russia — which they say was the result of Western pressure — and how they were invited to take part in the Madrid NATO summit.

Following the same logic, according to many Chinese thinkers, Europeans were then prevailed upon to include China in the NATO strategic concept and take tougher stances on Chinese tech.

However, these thinkers take heart from the fact that Washington has failed to rally the rest of the world to its cause. As one intellectual noted, in contrast to the Cold War, the West has met with little success in mobilizing developing nations behind Ukraine, claiming a total of 157 countries support neither the West nor China on the matter. Winning over these “non-aligned” countries and capitalizing on America's reputational weakness have thus become a key objective of Chinese foreign policy.

This battle for the Global South extends well beyond the question of the war on Ukraine too. As an alternative to American “feudalism,” Beijing has devised its own offerings in the form of its Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative — all of which were enthusiastically pitched to forum participants, many of whom were from countries China's actively courting.

The second lesson is that China feels it has more to gain than to lose from standing by Russia. But while the presence of Russian experts at the WPF highlighted Beijing's pro-Moscow leanings, with the forum's Russian guests honored with the best speaking slots, a clear sentiment is emerging that Moscow is now — at best — Beijing's junior partner. Prompted to comment on Russia's military performance, almost all the

Chinese experts we talked to reacted with palpable derision. And quite a few seemed to think that Russia no longer merits great power status.

This tactical tendency to be very critical of how Russia is waging its war goes hand in hand with a strategic desire to not see Russian President Vladimir Putin humiliated or driven from power. Although there have been very critical voices — one scholar even claimed China has been a victim of a hybrid war waged by Russia, including attempts to manipulate its media and dupe its leaders into appearing more supportive than they want to be — the consensus is that the two countries are united by a shared vision of a post-Western world order.

Another takeaway is that Chinese thinkers seem to believe the conflict in Ukraine has made war in Taiwan neither more nor less likely. The official line is that “Ukraine is not Taiwan,” but scholars are watching the conflict closely. And many were surprised by the West’s unity and activism, with its sanctions against Russia and military aid to Kyiv. However, they also noted that many of the arguments about not wanting to fight directly with a nuclear power would also apply to China when it comes to Taiwan. As a result, they think the West will adopt a porcupine strategy, arming Taiwan and supporting local powers like Japan rather than necessarily planning for direct engagement.

Lastly, the Chinese believe economic interdependence won’t protect China in the event of a confrontation with the West, and that Beijing must be prepared for sanctions instead. Appropriately, there was much talk of economic security, supply chains and sanction-proofing at the WPF. And at one point in the proceedings, Dilma Rousseff — Brazil’s former president who now runs the New Development Bank — was brought out to criticize Western attempts at “decoupling” and “de-risking,” calling for de-dollarization in order to protect countries against Western bullying.

In this sense, the vision of world order that China presented at the WPF is very much reflected in its priorities on Ukraine. Much like the forum, the war has provided Beijing with an opportunity to exploit Western weaknesses to make China more secure internationally, by expanding its ties with the Global South, nurturing its image as a peace broker and speeding up its efforts to become more economically self-reliant.

One Chinese academic we talked to in Beijing explained that something positive can come from a negative situation. “As long as China doesn’t need to arm Russia,” he said, “people will continue to hope Beijing can play a constructive role.”

Something for the forum’s puzzled Western diplomats to consider.