



Businesses at a trading centre known as Russia Market in Beijing, China. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, small signs that there are in fact limits to Sino-Russian cooperation have emerged, says the writer. China abstained from voting on a United Nations Security Council resolution over Moscow's actions, rather than exercising its veto together with Russia. Two of the largest Chinese state banks have restricted financing for Russian commodities. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

War in Ukraine: China, Russia and the international order

The Sino-Russian partnership will hold despite the complications for Beijing. But China is tainted by association.



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For *The Straits Times*

How complicit was China in Russia's invasion of Ukraine? We will never know for sure what exactly transpired between Mr Vladimir Putin and Mr Xi Jinping when they met just before the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympics in early February. But some things can be inferred from the chronology of events and China's actions and inactions.

On Feb 4, Mr Putin and Mr Xi issued a joint statement that, among other things, described the friendship between Russia and China as having "no limits", "no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation" and not being "affected by the changing international environment and circumstantial changes in third countries".

On Feb 22, only two days after the Olympics closed, Mr Putin suddenly recognised the two separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbass region of Ukraine and moved in Russian "peacekeepers".

On Feb 24, Russia began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Donbass had effectively been under Russian control or at least out of Kyiv's authority since 2014. Russia had been massing troops around Ukraine for months. That Mr Putin did not move until after the Beijing Winter Olympics suggests some measure of coordination.

But on Feb 19, speaking at the Munich Security Conference, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi had unequivocally stated that the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all

countries should be respected and safeguarded, describing this as "a basic norm of international relations" embodied in the United Nations Charter and "the consistent, principled position of China".

Just in case there was any doubt about what he was talking about, Mr Wang added "and that applies equally to Ukraine". He dismissed any questioning of China's attitude as "ill-intended sensationalisation and a distortion of China's position".

Contrary to popular belief, good diplomats seldom tell outright lies, particularly lies that will be exposed within a few days by events. Whatever else you may think of Mr Wang, he is not a bad diplomat. Russia's invasion of Ukraine left him and other Chinese diplomats with a great deal of egg dripping down their faces.

China is neurotic about external support for "separatists" in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and, of course, Taiwan. But that is what Russia did in Crimea and the Donbass and is trying to do in Ukraine as a whole. Mr Putin has said Ukraine "never had a tradition of genuine statehood" and was "an anti-Russian project".

Since the Russian invasion, the world has been treated to the spectacle of Chinese diplomats contorting themselves into awkward and uncomfortable postures, trying to simultaneously defend the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity and Russia's gross violation of these principles in Ukraine. The word "invasion" has been expunged from the Chinese diplomatic lexicon.

Of course, Mr Wang may not have been privy to everything that passed between Mr Xi and Mr Putin. He is not in Mr Xi's inner circle and the Foreign Ministry is not high in the hierarchy of Chinese institutions. In the final analysis, if caught in inconvenient lies, diplomats, including foreign ministers, are expendable. But Mr Putin may not have fully

confided his plans to Mr Xi. All I said about diplomacy and lying applies even more strongly to summit-level diplomacy. Unlike foreign ministers, leaders do not think of themselves as expendable and trust between leaders once lost is difficult to restore.

Mr Putin is unlikely to have directly lied to Mr Xi. But leaders seldom speak very clearly to each other. Mr Xi may have been led to believe that the war would be a limited grey zone operation as it was in the Donbass from 2014 to 2022. Or Mr Xi may have thought that Russia would quickly prevail as it did in Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014. Indeed, Mr Putin himself may have believed that this would be a quick victory.

Some element of wishful thinking or selective hearing may have been at play. After all, at a time of slowing growth, China could not have wanted a major European conflict, which would add to the uncertainties of a world economy only beginning to recover from the pandemic recession and further complicate its relations with the US and Europe. The mind plays tricks even on the powerful, and the mind is perhaps particularly deceptive to the powerful who are seldom told anything contrary to what they already think they know.

Beijing did nothing initially to evacuate the estimated 6,000 Chinese citizens in Ukraine. The safety of Chinese citizens abroad is a sensitive domestic issue. On the day Russia attacked, when other countries were advising their citizens to leave, the People's Republic of China embassy in Kyiv advised Chinese citizens to stay at home or display the Chinese flag. The very next day, the embassy changed its advice to tell Chinese not to reveal their nationality.

LIMITS TO SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION

After the invasion, small signs that there are in fact limits to Sino-Russian cooperation have emerged. China abstained in the UN Security Council rather than exercising its veto together with Russia. Two of the largest Chinese state banks have restricted financing for Russian commodities.

Mr Xi and Mr Putin spoke by telephone last Friday. Mr Xi reportedly said China respected the sovereignty of all countries and abides by the UN Charter, and urged Mr Putin to resolve issues with Ukraine through negotiations. The Chinese media reported that Mr Putin told Mr Xi that Russia is willing to conduct high-level talks with Ukraine. What the talks would be about was not disclosed, if Mr Putin mentioned it at all. So far, ceasefire talks have had no results.

On Tuesday, Mr Wang spoke to his Ukrainian counterpart by telephone. The PRC Foreign Ministry statement on the conversation was a clear indication of a change of approach and finally called what is happening in Ukraine a war. It said that China was "deeply grieved" over the conflict and "highly concerned about the damage done to civilians". It said that China had "always advocated respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries" and called on Ukraine and Russia to "find a solution through negotiations".

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba reportedly asked China to mediate a ceasefire. The statement claimed that China had played a "constructive role" on this and Ukraine had stepped up communication with China. It did not mention whether China had been in communication with Russia.

These shifts of position do not suggest clear foreknowledge of Russia's plans by China.

Rather, they suggest that China too was caught off guard, at least by the scale and ferocity of the Russian offensive if not by the general Russian intention to bring Ukraine under its sway.

On the ground, the war does not seem to be going as well as the Kremlin expected. Still, it is only less than a week old. As I write this, a 60km-long Russian military convoy, including armour, is moving towards Kyiv. In the end, unless Mr Putin abandons the military option or is removed by a palace coup – both of which seem unlikely at present – the sheer weight of Russia's offensive will probably eventually prevail. It is difficult at present to

imagine any good outcome for Ukraine. Unfortunately, the two most probable scenarios at this time are annexation as in Crimea, or a quisling government in Kyiv as in the Donbass.

What will be the long-term implications of a Ukraine under direct or indirect Russian rule for China, for Sino-Russian relations, and for international order?

A LOSE-LOSE SITUATION

Despite belated attempts to distance itself from the Russian invasion, China is tainted by association. At press time, the UN General Assembly was preparing to vote on a resolution to condemn the Russian invasion. I would be greatly surprised if China supports the resolution.

Beijing is in a lose-lose situation. If it abstains – as I expect it will – it will anger Russia and once again demonstrate that the claim of "no limits" to Sino-Russian cooperation is hollow. But unless it votes with the vast majority of UN members to condemn the invasion, the anxieties that many countries already harbour about China's ambitions will be enhanced.

The rouble has plummeted. With its reserves in the West frozen, Russia will turn to China for help because it has nowhere else to go. How will China respond? I do not think China is eager to throw good money after bad, but I doubt Beijing can entirely spurn Moscow.

Although the Chinese government may have realised it made a mistake in blindly following Moscow, the Chinese public is still cheering Russia's invasion and the West's inability to stop it. So whatever its reservations, Beijing has to appear supportive. China is navigating a precarious line internally as well as externally.

Sino-Russian relations are certainly not as idyllic as portrayed in the Feb 4 joint statement. But whatever the underlying tensions, the two countries share a common discomfort with a Western-dominated international order and neither country has any better option than each other; neither has any strategically significant country in its camp except the other.

The Sino-Russian partnership will therefore hold. It is a fantasy to think that the West resetting relations with one or the other will wean Russia from China or China from Russia.

There are good reasons for the West to stabilise its competition with China and Russia, but splitting them is just not on the cards, at least for the foreseeable future. Russia will become even more of a junior partner beholden to China. This may prove as much a burden as an asset to Beijing.

Whatever tactical successes Russia may score on the battlefield, it is now clear that Mr Putin miscalculated strategically and China has followed him into a strategic dead end from which it cannot easily exit.

The invasion of Ukraine has reinvigorated the idea of "The West" which had been deconstructing itself since the end of the Cold War. Significantly, Germany doubled its defence budget overnight. Mr Putin has succeeded in what all American presidents since Bill Clinton had failed to do: Get Europe to take its defence seriously.

As long as Russia remains in Ukraine, the West will cohere and the Russian albatross around its neck will complicate China's relations with Europe and the US. Only very shallow analysts think that Ukraine will give China a free ride as Iraq and Afghanistan did. The situations are entirely different – it is China's partner Russia not its rival America that is bogged down this time.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR SINGAPORE

Do Singaporeans understand what is at stake in Ukraine? I hope so. The ministerial statement in Parliament on Monday was a model of clarity on the principles involved and Singapore's interests. But it was a Malaysian tweeter who laid out starkly without diplomatic politesse the implications of those abstract principles. On Tuesday, he wrote: "I can understand where Singapore is coming from. Putin's irredentism, wanting to fold Ukraine back into the ancient and 'true' Russia, is a similar threat they could face. There are many in Malaysia who refer to Singapore as 'the island we lost', even today."

I do not think anyone in the Malaysian government harbours irredentist thoughts about us. But this is a dangerous world and Malaysian politics – indeed politics in South-east Asia generally – is getting more volatile.

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