



EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

CONTACT GROUP ON RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

China and India

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Highlights

- China's position on Russia-China relations and on the Russia-West confrontation is not monolithic. Although the Chinese government has presented a relatively consistent and developed position, the general public is divided on these issues.
- Beijing sees itself as a security and peace facilitator.
- China believes that military confrontation undermines the stability of the international system and that a zero-sum game must be avoided.
- Beijing opposes any use of nuclear weapons and considers it a 'red line' that should not be crossed
- India is situated between the West-Russia and US-China confrontations. For India, the conflict in Ukraine is a 'noisy elephant in the room.' New Delhi's priority is preventing the conflict's detrimental impact on the global economy and supply chains.
- Considering India's current leading role both in the G20 and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the country has a responsibility to address this crisis, suggesting neutral platforms for dialogue and seeking credible peace plans.

Summary

Following on from previous discussions about the position of Turkey and those of other non-aligned countries on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Contact Group convened in March to discuss perspectives from China and India.

It was argued that China's view on China-Russia relations is not monolithic. Even though there is one government line, there are diverse views representing the general public and academia. While the Chinese government maintains a wider framework of cooperation with Russia, from local to

international levels, public opinion is more diverse. It can be divided into those who are 'aligned' (see Russia as an opportunity for China), 'suspicious' (view Russia as a problem) and 'realist' (think that the relations should be maintained as they are).

The same diversity of views is on display when it comes to the Russia-West confrontation. The government's view can be summarised as follows. Confrontation is not in China's interest, therefore, Beijing's focus is on trying to bring Parties to the negotiation table. Public views vary from sympathy towards Russia (i.e. approving more of Russia's actions and less of those of the US) to disapproval of Russian imperialism in Ukraine, and to ambivalence about this confrontation. The public generally opposes the war because it negatively impacts supply chains and global stability.

India sees the confrontation in a slightly different way. For India, it is a double confrontation: the West vs Russia in Europe (as a result of Russia's declining power) and the US vs China in the Indo-Pacific (as a result of China's rising power). India considers itself a potential mediator, thanks to the country's chairmanship in the G20 and SCO. India is, however, hesitant to provide international mediation for historical reasons (although it can be persuaded to do so). Yet it is interested in facilitating bilateral peace-making processes, providing neutral platforms for negotiations and seeking credible peace plans. India perceives this conflict as unacceptable and unnecessary. It is not only detrimental to the Indian economy, but it may also lead to a nuclear escalation, which all countries must avoid.

China's views on Russia-China relations

An expert from China argued that there is no monolithic view in China on the China-Russia relationship: on the one hand, there are views of the government, and on the other, those of the general public (including academia).

The government's position has four main aspects when it comes to the relations between China and Russia. First, there is a special personal relationship between President Xi and President Putin, which is guiding the relationship between the two countries. Second, Moscow and Beijing have set up a multitiered framework for cooperation, which includes political, economic, social and security dimensions. Third, both sides maintain close collaboration at the UN and within other international and transnational organisations, such as SCO and the G20, in trying to contain the United States.

Views from the general public, including academia, are much more diverse but are roughly split between three schools of thought. On the one side of the spectrum, there is an 'alignment' school, which supports 'upgrading' China-Russia relations towards a military and security alliance, with unlimited partnership, de facto and de jure.

The second school, on the other side of the spectrum, can be called ‘suspicious.’ Those who belong to it, refer to deeply rooted historical mistrust between China and Russia, and hence think that an assertive Russia would not be an asset but rather a problem for China.

The third school is somewhere in between the mentioned two and can be called ‘realist.’ ‘Realists’ recognise that Chinese and Russian national interests converge; however, they are also aware that full alignment would constrain Chinese diplomacy and hence is not in China’s long-term interest. They believe that economic ties and people-to-people contacts should be an internal driving force of China-Russia relations.

The expert from China argued that a nuclear war, which is against the interests of human beings, is strongly opposed by Beijing, and could change China’s calculus. That is also why Beijing has been proactive in promoting negotiations between Parties.

China’s views on the Russia-West confrontation

Similar to the Chinese views on Russia-China relations, China’s position on the Russia-West confrontation can also be viewed from the government and public angles.

According to the Chinese government, the main source of confrontation between Russia and the West is NATO’s expansion to the east, which fosters a ‘cold war’ mentality. Therefore, NATO is to blame for the current confrontation, which undermined peace and stability in the world. The Russia-West confrontation is not in China’s interest, as Beijing has economic relations with both actors and therefore aspires to a more stable global order. Finally, Beijing thinks its leverage is in bringing Parties to a negotiation table; it has become more active in brokering diplomatic deals this year.

Opinions of the public and academia on the Russia-West confrontation can be roughly divided into three strands of thought. A ‘sympathy’ group blames the US China-containment policy for the deterioration of China-US relations, and therefore sympathises with Russia, as the latter also opposes the US. A ‘disapproval’ group attributes the confrontation to Vladimir Putin’s imperial ambitions, of which the war in Ukraine is the most vivid example. Finally, an ‘ambivalence’ group, whilst sympathising with Russia on the one hand, opposes the war in Ukraine on the other, as the latter has a great negative impact on supply chains and undermines the stability of the international system, all of which is detrimental to China.

Overall, China sees an advantage in using multilateral platforms to elaborate more balanced, constructive and inclusive proposals for solving the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

China does not compare the Russia-Ukraine confrontation with its position on Taiwan.

India's view on the Russia-West confrontation and mediation options

According to the speaker from India, the country has been dealing with confrontation in two regions: the West vs Russia in Europe, and the US vs China in the Indo-Pacific. While the former is driven by Russia's declining power, the latter is a consequence of China becoming more powerful and assertive. This is shifting geopolitics and a new reality to deal with.

United Nations is an outdated forum in many respects. The G20 has a greater role to play. As the G20 chair, India can shape the global agenda. The country has tried to define largely an economy-centric agenda for the G20, but the conflict in Ukraine remains a 'very noisy elephant in the room.' India is also the President of SCO until September 2023, and the conflict will be discussed between SCO foreign ministers.

The Indian expert argued that India has been trying to steer both sides towards dialogue and diplomacy. Prime Minister Modi told President Vladimir Putin that 'this is not an era of war.'

However, India's historical experience (vis-à-vis Pakistan) makes it hesitant about international mediation. Nevertheless, the Indian expert argued that India can be persuaded to take a lead in facilitating negotiations between Parties. Based on past experience, there may be three key lessons. First, communication is important (a reference to the Cuban missile crisis). Second, windows of opportunity open and shut rapidly, so it is important to grasp opportunities as soon as possible. Third, it is vital to prepare options for peace to make a peace-making process easier; there must be neutral platforms for negotiations and credible peace plans on the table.

It was noted that India does not see current peace plans as credible: both Zelensky's '10 points' and Chinese '12 points' are maximalist and one-sided.

To bring peace, the speaker suggested two 'troikas,' made up of countries that could provide a neutral platform for negotiations. One is India-Israel-Turkey, and the second is a 'G20 troika,' consisting of past, current and future chairs of the G20 (Indonesia-India-Brazil). All of these countries are from the Global South, which has been deeply affected by the consequences of the war in Ukraine, such as hikes in food and fertiliser prices and interruptions in global supply chains).

In conclusion, India believes this conflict is detrimental to the Indian economy and worries that it may lead to a nuclear escalation. Therefore, it is crucial to work on peaceful solutions to the crisis. Finding several alternative pathways (a 'bouquet of options') towards that should be a goal for the short term.

***Feedback? Questions? Please reach out to Jane Kinnimont –
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