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Unrequited friendship - epilogue of the New Year's conversation between Xi and Putin



Putin's hand was not left hanging when he greeted Chinese President Xi Jinping on Friday during a video call, but the grip he received from the other side was not as strong as he had expected. There are important differences in the interpretations of this conversation from Moscow and Beijing. It appeared not to have been the same meeting. It seems as if Moscow published notes with its expectations ahead of the talks, and Beijing carefully selected what would not harm it.

To "Dear friend" from the Russian president, the Chinese leader responded with "My friend", but the degree of cordiality was possibly the least important factor. As an important part of the talks, Moscow announced that Xi would visit in early 2023, but there was no mention of a visit in the Chinese version of the talks. Xi last visited Moscow four years ago, and although he has met Putin frequently, most recently in Beijing just three weeks before the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, China's reluctance to confirm Xi's visit to Moscow suggests that no such meeting has yet been agreed.

China has reason to be reluctant, probably due to Putin's expectation of increased military cooperation between the two countries. It is clear that this kind of cooperation is crucial for Putin, along with the sale of oil and gas, because the Russian leader is embedded in a war where his military potential has been drastically reduced.

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Beijing's pragmatism obviously has no need to prove its closeness to Russia with significant military support. This would disavow China's previous restrained and neutral position regarding the war in Ukraine, but more importantly, it would classify Beijing as a direct military supplier of Putin's aggression, which would cross a red line for partners in the West. Beijing, in reporting the conversation between the two leaders, emphasised the difference in positions

towards the war in Ukraine, stressing that China will remain "objective and fair".

This reflects the difference in understanding within the alliance. China does not want to be part of Putin's perception of the future world order, which is based on resistance to "unprecedented pressure and provocations from the West". President Xi did not openly criticise Putin for the aggression against Ukraine, which would have been too much at the moment, but he has also not given a reason for tightening relations with the West, by not mentioning any material support for Russia and its military campaign. Also hovering over this conversation were Xi's words that he has "questions and concerns" regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as he told Putin at the regional summit in Uzbekistan last September.

Although not repeated in the New Year's conversation, "questions and concerns" still exist on the Chinese side and largely determine Beijing's behaviour towards Moscow. Putin's tone in the conversation with Xi did not differ much from previous meetings. He overemphasised friendship, partnership and joint efforts in building the future world. But that made him tragically out of date, because President Xi has had another extremely important meeting since his last conversation with Putin, which was with the US President, last November in Indonesia. This meeting marked the return of US-China relations to an upward trajectory, closing the options for conflict and emphasising the interests of both countries to stabilise their relations. That was bad news for Putin and his expectation to include China more strongly in his plans to reshape the world order.

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China's desire to stabilise relations with America came just after the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party,

where Xi won an historic third leadership term. It is a reflection of his effort to stabilise, immediately after the CCP Congress, the conditions in China itself, affected by the long lockdown and the cooling of the economy. The goals that Xi set at the 20th Congress - modernisation of the country, openness to the world and the world to China - would not be achievable by turning to Putin and Russia, but only by stabilising the turbulent relations with the West.

Xi confirmed this in the conversation with Biden last November, but also two days ago in the conversation with Putin, more by what he failed to say rather than by what he said. The maximum that Putin will be able to expect from China is its insistence on establishing peace in Ukraine and turning to a political solution.

This is the position that Beijing has taken from the outset of Russian aggression. “[The war] has been a nuisance for China this past year and has affected China’s interest in Europe. But the damage is not significant enough that China will abandon Russia. China is eager for [the war] to end. Xi will try to emphasise the importance of peace to Putin”, said Yun Sun, director of the China Program at the Washington-based think tank Stimson Centre, according to CNN.

If Putin shows genuine signs of stopping his aggression against Ukraine and turns to negotiations, China will have an interest in supporting him. Not in his verbal request for peace where he actually asks for Kyiv's capitulation, which he has been doing since the start. China's support for Russia will only go as far as ensuring Beijing's stable relations with the West, as they are key to the much-needed stabilisation of the economy and its further expected growth. And that is the complete opposite of Putin's hopes to share "the same views on the course and logic of the ongoing transformation of the global geopolitical landscape" with China.