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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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China loses diplomatic momentum, marginalised from peace initiatives for Ukraine

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed his delight at the shift regarding the Ukraine crisis, which the US and Russia have initiated with a series of high-level talks, including a long telephone conversation between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin.

China is pleased to see all efforts towards peace, a top Chinese diplomat said at last week's Munich Security Conference, where his participation was somewhat overshadowed by the breakthrough in dialogue between Washington and Moscow over Ukraine.

Beijing did not have much choice but to welcome in principle the sudden mutual opening of the US and Russia. However, this initial reaction from a high-ranking Beijing official is far from the actual situation China finds itself in when it comes to opening a fast lane to resolving one of the biggest global crises.

In Beijing, there is indeed not much reason to be happy about the latest development. Therefore, Minister Wang's supportive words in Munich are nothing more than ordinary diplomatic flattery.

China is not the only country that seems to have been caught off guard by the sudden rapprochement between Trump and Putin over Ukraine. European capitals were disappointed by the US's initial refusal to participate in the dialogue, and their leaders resisted Washington's intention to assume exclusivity in the peace talks through a series of emergency talks.

However, Beijing cannot afford to take a more aggressive stance towards the US-Russia deal, as advocated by the leaders of the most influential EU member states and the UK.

The price of suspicious neutrality

Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China has presented itself as a neutral factor, repeating phrases about the need for peace. To this end, but without much ambition to actually end the war, Beijing presented a 12-point peace initiative in early 2023.

As expected, this list of Beijing's usual talking points, which can be applied to any other crisis in the world, has not brought about any change either among the parties to the conflict or among the interested global actors.

“China’s vague plan is aimed not at actually ending the war, but at impressing the developing world and rebutting accusations that Beijing has become a silent accomplice to Moscow,” Alexander Gabuev from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace wrote at the time.

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In fact, China has pursued a dual course in relation to the Ukraine crisis over the past three years. Its diplomacy has been fundamentally in favour of peace, invoking the basic international principles of the UN.

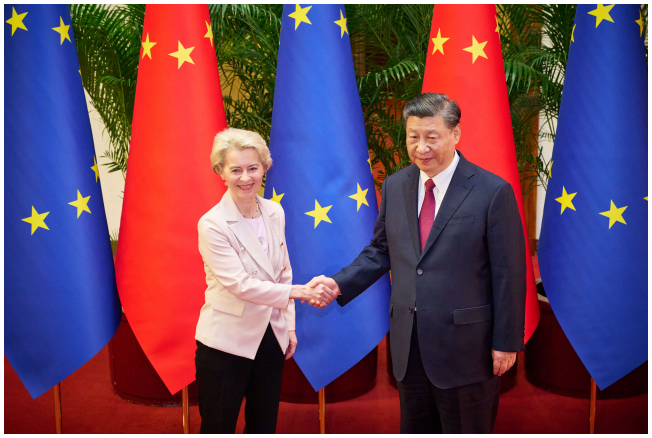
On the other hand, Beijing has effectively acted as Moscow's most important ally and has reaped enormous tangible economic benefits from this support. Western economic sanctions have made China the only window for Russian exports, especially energy products and raw materials, giving it the opportunity to blackmail the isolated Kremlin, which it has made ample use of all along.

Economic loss

The rapprochement between Washington and Moscow over peace in Ukraine threatens to jeopardise China's political and economic domination over Russia. Moreover, the rhetoric in the Russian-US talks so far points to an economic rapprochement, possibly an easing of sanctions, whereby Beijing loses its exclusivity when it comes to the privileged market for Russian exports at negligible prices.

The "no limits" partnership that Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping spoke of shortly before the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, and which they often repeated over the next three years, is now facing a major test.

The way out of the enormous economic difficulties that President Trump suddenly opened up for Vladimir Putin by giving him the chance to conclude a peace deal on Ukraine is an offer for the Kremlin that is worth reconsidering the "no limit" partnership with China.



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Although it is still too early for such a Russian realignment, it is clear from Chinese reactions that they are aware of the existence of such a possibility.

In Munich, Minister Wang Yi emphasised that European leaders should also take part in the peace talks on Ukraine, thus directly opposing Washington's plans not to include Europe in the negotiations.

“As the war is taking place in Europe, it is all the more necessary for Europe to play its part for peace,” said the Chinese minister.

Although Trump has since corrected his position under pressure from the Europeans and opened the door to their participation in the talks, it is clear that Beijing wants to at least try to bind Europe to itself by using its sharp conflict with Trump's course on Ukraine.

Declining global influence

China's position is also weakening as a result of the shift in the Ukraine crisis, which is affecting its efforts to position itself as a key player in resolving other global crises.

In recent years, Beijing has made great diplomatic efforts to position itself as a leading political and security power in the "global South" and has often taken the initiative in resolving major regional crises.

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However, the first high-level talks between the US and Russia took place in Saudi Arabia, one of the focal points of Chinese diplomacy and economy in recent years.

As the talks on Ukraine continue in Riyadh, the Kingdom stands to benefit greatly diplomatically if they are successful. China will not be involved in these efforts, and Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with America and Russia will have a strategic dimension.

On the other hand, this is another major blow to China's ambitions to increase its influence in the Middle East after the presence of Iran, a key ally of Beijing, in the region has been weakened.