

Understanding the Putin-Xi Pivot in Ukraine

by Alexander Görlach,

The war Russia wages against Ukraine has now entered its fifth week. The “Blitzkrieg”-victory Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin dreamt of clearly did not come true. To the contrary, Russia, met with fierce resistance by the Ukrainian population, has been unable to defeat the Ukrainian military. The staggering support the free world is handing to the besieged nation goes hand in hand with decisive condemnation of Vladimir Putin’s actions. Western sanctions have hit the fortune of the Russian oligarchs who form the narrow circle of wealthy people in Russia. The pariah that he deserves to be, **Vladimir Putin appears to believe he has one last major ally he can rely on: The People’s Republic of China.**

A month prior to Russia’s invasion, China’s leader Xi Jinping had just received Putin in early February as guest of honour to the Winter Olympics. The two published a communique that highlighted the friendship of their countries, and reads as if there is no other partnership with the same significance and priority to Beijing than the one with the Russian Federation. Xi and Putin agreed to work together on a variety of issues, amongst them space technologies and internet surveillance. **Both dictators are united by their desire to limit Western promotion of human rights, freedom and democracy.** To them, Western liberalism and global rule of law is embodied in the United States of America, an old enemy to Moscow, and **rediscovered adversary to Beijing under the tenure of Xi.** Considering the history of tenuous relations between China and Russia, the support Xi offered Putin can be considered foremost as a gauntlet thrown at the United States, indicating that a potential axis Beijing-Moscow would well be capable of challenging the supremacy of the US and its allies of the free world.

Enter the Russian army invading Ukraine. There are two possible readings of this event from Beijing’s perspective with respect to the conflict’s onset. One suggests that Xi asked Putin to refrain from his invasion until the end of the Olympic Games. The other one claims that **Beijing was caught off-guard by the start of war.** The latter perspective is more convincing. It is fair to assume that a Russian attack on Ukraine would have disturbed the Olympic Games whose ideals rest on the notion of peace. Given Russia’s expulsion from numerous sports federations and competitions the Russian Olympic team might have been expelled from the Winter Games in Beijing immediately. Instead of risking that, the Kremlin was better off celebrating each of the 32 medals won by Russian athletes in Beijing (even authoritarian regimes need “good pictures” to support their claims to legitimacy).

This gives reason to believe that **Beijing was rather kept in the dark about the start of the invasion.** Considering Putin’s erratic behaviour before the war, portrayed in hour long, ranting speeches one might wonder whether anyone else, even in the top leadership of the Russian forces, knew much beforehand whether there would be an invasion. **Putin’s singlehanded decision put the alliance between him and Xi under strain.** Beijing supports the claim of sovereignty of the Ukrainian nation and was therefore not in favour of the acknowledgement of the two separatist regions in Eastern Ukraine by the Kremlin to begin with. Supporting separatism would, in the eyes of Beijing, support the Taiwanese quest for statehood. A fully-fledged invasion was a different thing and, albeit not to Xi’s liking, better exploited rhetorically than the previous move by the Kremlin. Therefore, ever since the unjust war Russia started, **Beijing is not calling the war an invasion but, in accordance with the Russian wording, a “special military operation.”** Therefore, Beijing has hinted it wants to see the conflict as an **internal security matter** rather than an international one. This bears similarity to the Chinese position on Taiwan: an internal matter. Xi Jinping has declared that he will complete the “reunification” of the Chinese motherland and, if necessary, with military force. He has vowed this will happen in “our lifetime.” **Evident from his recent speeches, Putin views Ukraine as a part of Russia too.** Taken hostage by a “fascist gang,” the rhetoric the Kremlin uses for the legitimately elected government of president Zelensky, himself of Jewish faith, is now an obstacle to the Kremlin leader’s desire to “re-unify” his “Sacred Russia.” Both leaders conveniently leave out basic facts of history to convey their false narratives: Kiev was a cultural, economic, and political hub when Moscow was still an insignificant village. And the Chinese Communist leadership has not ruled one single day over the island of Taiwan.

It is important to recognize that **irredentism** is not limited to Putin and Xi. Turkish leader Recep Erdogan has pondered more than once how today’s borders of Turkey might be expanded to the reach what they once were

in the Ottoman times. It is not only the quest for land that makes illiberal leaders claim to be chosen by providence to lead their countries into a new era of glory, but their belief that history follows a purpose and portrays meaning. In this unfolding drama of time, they seek out their special place in world history. They are bestowed by some providence to “re-juvenate the nation,” as 68-year-old Xi Jinping declares. It was best visible in the 100-year anniversary of the founding of China’s Communist Party last July when Xi was placed in the middle and on the top of all events celebrating that date. Furthermore, he summoned and lead the large military parade in the heart of Beijing.

Their historical speculation is by all means not alien to European listeners. From Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel to Karl Marx, the ideas of purpose, sense, and destination of history have been rampant in the Western history of thought. They were always construed to support claims to power. Hegel saw multiple realms over the trajectory of time, each new one better than the prior. He understood the European Empire of his time as the fulfilment of the will of History. Marx understood History as a class struggle brought to its end by a victorious working class. In the current era, Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama build on this notion in their books *Clash of Civilisations* and *The End of History*. All of this historic speculation stems from Western Christianity, which sees the history of the world as a History of Salvation, beginning with creation, culminating in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and ending with his glorious second coming.

For the most part European countries have abandoned this understanding of history and therefore fail to understand how its underlying logics may continue to motivate dictators like Putin and Xi. Elias Canetti stated in his masterpiece *Crowd and Power* that the loss of religious zeal across is one reason why Europe fails to mobilise its population. It is indeed the reason why Europe today, for the most part, is bewildered by any sort of land grabbing, which was a means of politics in eras not long bygone. And it comes as a fact in history (with a lower case) that the “Old World” has seen an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity after it abolished nationalism and religious delusion in favour of freedom and democracy. **In order to reaffirm his claim Putin has resurrected the Orthodox Church, which is now backing his war.** Once more a disturbing union of “throne and altar” brings suffering and death over the European continent. **Xi on the other hand governs China with the help of Confucianism and the moral-cultural philosophy** of his advisor Wang Huning. He appeals to the teachings of the philosopher to back his idea of society as a stratified order in which everyone has to play the role that is assigned to him and her. This is why everybody from school kids to Supreme Court judges in China now needs to read “**Xi Jinping’s Thought**,” a series of elaborations by the supreme leader. Both dictators also believe in some sort of cultural superiority. Putin, by attempting to grab the entire neighbouring nation of Ukraine, repeats Hitler’s ideology of “Lebensraum,” meaning the land beyond Germany’s borders to the East whose inhabitants he wanted to go extinct or kill, to then settle **Arian Germans** on their land. **The natives, if they had a role to play, would have to serve their new masters of dominant race.** For example, Putin has also repeatedly expressed his view **that the Baltic States and Moldova are a part of “Sacred Russia”.** **Xi believes in the ethnic superiority of the Han Chinese.** This has been made shockingly visible to the whole world by the treatment of the Uyghur people in the Northwestern province of Xinjiang: more than one million men are held prisoners in concentration camps, visible through satellite footage, and China collects biometrical data on Uyghur, voice recording and DNA samples. Ancient mosques are destroyed and the culture of the Uyghur people is being eradicated— US Congress called these unsettling crimes rightfully a genocide.

By their uncompromising vow to end what they both perceive as a “century of humiliation” by the West, they bring Russia and China to the threshold of a century of shame. For Putin, the remaining question is how many lives will be destroyed on the way. Putin has maneuvered Russia and its economy to the brink of collapse. **It is only a matter of weeks, days even, until Putin has to abort his war.** **China officially says it will not grant Russia military supply.** If that promise holds, Russia is out of ammunition and supply shortly.

Beijing can already anticipate how its land grab of Taiwan would be met by the free world: decisively and effectively. Japan and the United States have declared that Taiwan is important to their countries’ security. Given the proximity to Japan and the importance the Taiwanese chip production for the American economy, this is not a hollow statement. And Beijing, reading the room, will likely tread more lightly: It is not supporting Western sanctions, but it is also not helping the Russian economy. It expresses support for Russia but is not voting with Russia at the Security Council. The Chinese economy has already taken a hit from the war against Ukraine: the prices for wheat, crops, and soybeans are through the roof. In the People’s Republic where

estimated 82 million people live with less than a dollar per day, escalating prices might create shortages and unrest. **Xi may have to ultimately cut ties with his new best friend Putin in the context of Ukraine.** His foreign minister Wang Yi asked both sides to return to the negotiation table and end the war. The best advice Beijing should give itself is to reject Putin's appeal to **irredentism**, and avoid risking the same failure as Russia in the Taiwan Strait.