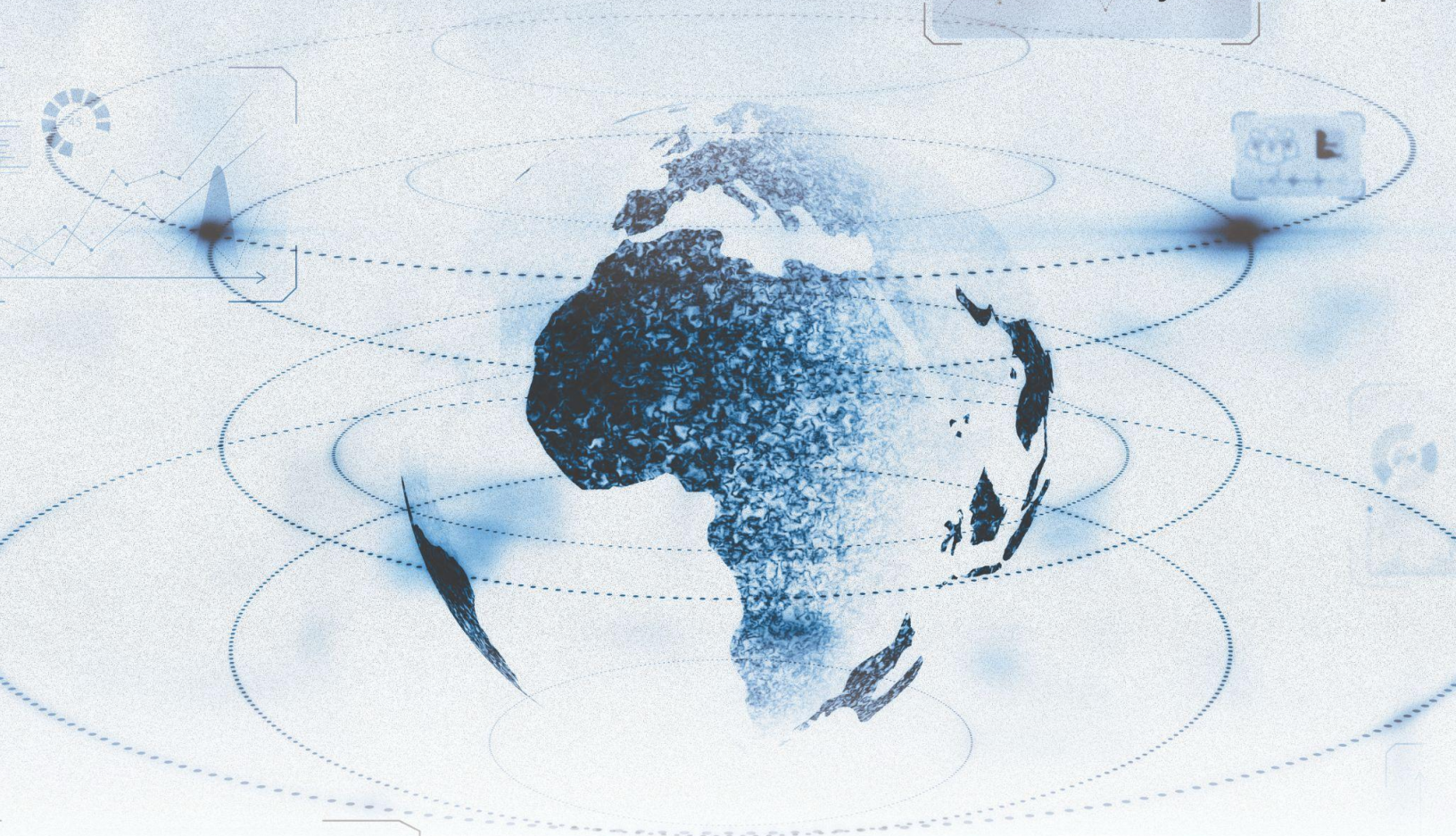


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By Insikt Group<sup>®</sup>



# On Ukraine, China Prioritizes Its International Ambitions

*This report evaluates China's position on the war in Ukraine and support for Russia, how this position and Beijing's proposed form of peace relates to China's international interests, and whether China is likely to provide lethal aid to Russia. Information about the author, Devin Thorne, can be found at the end of the report.*

## Executive Summary

Recently renewed allegations that China is considering providing lethal aid to Russia contrast starkly with Beijing's calls for peace and continued assertions that it is "[objective and just](#)" regarding the war in Ukraine. Based on a review of China's perspective on the war and what its leaders likely hope to achieve, Insikt Group judges that relations between China and the United States and Europe will almost certainly remain at odds for the duration of the war. Although China's position suggests there are areas of potential collaboration on peace, Beijing is likely pursuing a strategy of using a peace settlement to shape how future international crises are addressed, which contains elements that are almost certainly unacceptable to the US and others.

China's leadership almost certainly supports Russia — politically, rhetorically, and by allowing trade in dual-use goods<sup>1</sup> to continue — to further its own strategic agenda, specifically the preservation of an important partner in the creation of a more multilateral international system. China's leadership very likely wants a peaceful end to the war. However, China's leadership very likely does not support a peace deal that conforms to, and returns to the status quo of, the current international system as led by the US and legitimizes coercive Western measures used against Russia (namely, sanctions) that could be levied against China in the future (such as in a Taiwan scenario).

Despite its support for Russia's position, it is unlikely that China's leadership will approve the export of lethal aid to Russia. Such a decision will likely be judged too costly in light of other goals, such as stabilizing relations with the US and Europe and avoiding sanctions. The decision to provide lethal aid likely hinges on whether China's leadership judges that, in the short-to-mid term, stable (if not good) relations with the US and Europe are necessary. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping's personal relationship with Russian president Vladimir Putin also has the potential to [inform](#) how he weighs the available options. China's leadership has likely not yet made a decision to provide lethal aid, and as of this writing, has not (based on publicly available information) exported lethal aid to Russia. If China's leadership does decide to export lethal aid to Russia, the US and European response will very likely lead to a serious deterioration in relations with China for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>1</sup> "Dual-use" refers to goods that can be used for civilian and military purposes.

## Key Judgments

- China's leadership almost certainly supports Russia politically, rhetorically, and by allowing trade in dual-use goods to further its own strategic agenda.
- China's leadership very likely seeks a peaceful solution to the war, but not at the expense of its vision for how the international order should address future crises.
- It is unlikely that China's leadership will allow Chinese companies to provide to Russia what the US and Europe deem lethal aid.
- If China's leadership decides to export lethal aid to Russia, the US and Europe will almost certainly impose consequences that would very likely lead to a serious deterioration in relations with China for the foreseeable future.

## China Supports Russia in Pursuit of Its Own Goals

**Key Judgment: China's leadership almost certainly supports Russia politically, rhetorically, and by allowing trade in dual-use goods to further its own strategic agenda.** China's leadership has [repeatedly indicated](#) its intent to deepen the China-Russia relationship despite the war in Ukraine. This is very likely motivated by the assessment of Chinese leaders that Russia is an important partner in Beijing's [pursuit](#) of a reformed international system, where so-called hegemony (represented by the US) is weakened in favor of what China considers to be a more multilateral and consensus-based approach. This vision of the future is likely desirable because it would enable China more freedom of action and less international retaliation during the pursuit of its own interests, such as on the question of Taiwan. The personal relationship between CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping and Russian president Vladimir Putin is also likely a [motivating](#) factor in China's lasting support for Russia — the 2 leaders have met 39 times since late 2012 and Xi frequently calls Putin his “best friend and colleague”.

The Chinese government has almost certainly intentionally provided support to Russia in some areas, such as through oil [purchases](#), as part of maintaining and deepening the relationship. However, as of this writing, Beijing has likely sought to [avoid](#) providing support in ways that overtly violate sanctions and other red lines established by the US and Europe. It is unknown whether the Chinese party-state (particularly the central authorities in Beijing) knows of or has approved every form of trade, including of [dual-use equipment](#), between Chinese companies and Russian entities. Assertions such as those from US secretary of state Antony Blinken that “there's really [no distinction](#) between private companies and the state”, are not entirely [accurate](#). Although enterprise-state relations are [complex](#) and [blurred](#), companies can act independently or outside of the oversight of the central party-state — where foreign policy is [decided](#). In Insikt Group's view, not all company-level activity should be construed as indicating a state-led effort to actively aid Russia's war effort. That said, authorities in China are very likely aware of some of the activity, such as exports reportedly [labeled](#) “for military use”. Although the Chinese government likely does not support the war in Ukraine in narrow terms, China also [does not](#) support US-led sanctions in this or other matters, and therefore likely has no incentive to halt such trade unless it poses an unmanageable political burden in China's relationships with other countries or other costs are imposed.

Evidence of China's interest in deepening relations with Russia includes:

- On February 22, 2023, Director of the Office of the CCP Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission Wang Yi [met with](#) Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and others in Moscow. During the meetings, the representatives of China and Russia reaffirmed the countries' commitments to deepening cooperation as part of their comprehensive strategic partnership, and to working toward (in their view) improving the international system so it is more multipolar and democratic.
- Reaffirmations made in the above meeting build on the February 4, 2022, joint statement [issued](#) by China and Russia that cast China and Russia as the advocates of a new, multilateral international order in defense against aggressive "States" (almost certainly pointing primarily to the US) that act unilaterally. The statement highlights numerous areas in which China and Russia are close partners, will work together, or hold mutually supportive positions, and calls "for the establishment of a new kind of relationships [sic] between world powers on the basis of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and mutually beneficial cooperation". It affirmed their intention to strengthen and improve foreign policy coordination, "true multilateralism", and the international and regional balance of power, among other goals.
- On September 19, 2022, officials from China and Russia also [met](#) in Fujian Province, China, for the 17th Round of Strategic Security Consultations, which [followed](#) talks between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin on September 15, 2022, during a Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit. In these engagements, Chinese and Russian officials reportedly discussed "improving the security and stability of the external environment" of both countries, defending the United Nations-centered international system, [furthering](#) military-to-military cooperation, and deepening cooperation and trade in a variety of sectors.

Evidence of China's support for Russia politically, rhetorically, and by allowing trade in dual-use and non-lethal goods to continue includes:

- Multiple statements by various Chinese government officials since the start of the war express understanding for Russia's position and blame the war on the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Between September 7 and 10, 2022, Li Zhanshu, the chairman of China's National People's Congress Standing Committee, visited Russia and met with Vladimir Putin and other officials, [saying](#) China sees "that the United States and its NATO allies are expanding their presence near the Russian borders, seriously threatening national security and the lives of Russian citizens". In an August 2022 interview with Russia's state-owned news outlet TASS, China's ambassador to Moscow [called](#) the US "the initiator and main instigator of the Ukrainian crisis", highlighting Washington's use of sanctions and supply of arms and military equipment to Ukraine. In April 2022, multiple party-state media outlets and other entities [published](#) a [report](#) titled "Falsehoods Spread by the U.S. on the Ukraine Issue: A Reality Check", which asserted the US (and NATO) is at fault for the war and is profiting from it.
- From the start of the war, China's party-state media organizations and social media companies, almost certainly often at the [direction](#) of authorities, domestically [downplayed](#) Russia's war on

Ukraine, limited coverage of anti-war protests overseas, and [suppressed](#) dissenting sentiment within China. In March 2022, in what was likely a nationwide campaign, university and school teachers in at least 4 Chinese provinces attended online and offline “group class preparation activities” to learn about Russia’s war against Ukraine. The purpose was to equip teachers with talking points for handling students’ questions. The viewpoints shared within these “class preparation” events were highly critical of the US and NATO and defensive of Russia’s actions.

- On January 24, 2023, [Bloomberg](#) cited unnamed sources as saying the US government has evidence that China’s state-owned enterprises (SOEs) “may be” providing assistance to Russia and its war effort. The alleged support reportedly consisted of “non-lethal military and economic assistance that stops short of wholesale evasion of the sanctions regime”. On February 4, 2023, [The Wall Street Journal](#) reported that bulk trade data analysis showed “tens of thousands of shipments of dual-use goods ... that Russia imported following its invasion”. These transactions include shipments of non-lethal military-use products from state-owned and private Chinese firms to Russia’s state-owned military export firm JSC Rosoboronexport, such as navigation equipment for M-17 military transport helicopters; “a telescoping antenna for the RB-531BE military vehicle, which is used for communications jamming”; and “parts for Su-35 jet fighters”. Some of this activity very likely [represents](#) a continuation of trade begun prior to the war in Ukraine.
- On January 26, 2023, the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned Changsha Tianyi Space Science and Technology Research Institute Co., Ltd. (Spacety; 长沙天仪空间科技研究院有限公司) for providing synthetic aperture radar (SAR) satellite imagery to the Russian private military contractor Wagner Group “in order to enable [their] combat operations in Ukraine”.

## China Desires Peace According to Its Principles

**Key Judgment: China’s leadership very likely seeks a peaceful solution to the war, but not at the expense of its vision for how the international order should address future crises.** China’s leadership very likely [seeks](#) a peaceful resolution to the war — and almost certainly does not want the war to escalate to the use of nuclear weapons — though its sincerity toward peace is undermined by a lack of contact between Xi Jinping and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky since the start of the war despite Zelensky’s [attempts](#) to establish communication. Some [see](#) China’s calls for peace as a tactic to maintain its own reputation. Assuming their preference for peace is genuine, however, China’s leaders are very likely not willing, in pursuit of said peace, to conform to international demands or perspectives on the war in Ukraine in ways that would sacrifice the longer-term and more important goal of building a coalition of partners to challenge the US leadership of the international system. China’s leadership is likely not inclined to support a form of peace that would give legitimacy to diplomatic and economic tools that could be used against China in the future, such as sanctions, which it [views](#) as a [tool](#) of illegitimate American long-arm coercion. Further, China “[understands](#)” Russia’s perspective, and very likely has a preference for peace that protects Russia’s interests to some extent. This preference for accommodating Russia’s interests is likely seen by China’s leadership as “[objective and just](#)” because it does not perpetuate what it very likely sees as the hegemony of the US-led international order under the pre-war and even pre-2014 (when Crimea was [annexed](#)) status quo.

Peaceful resolutions that China might support include partitioning Ukraine to create a buffer zone for Russia or eliciting guarantees that Ukraine would not join NATO, though the Chinese government has not identified any specific scenarios it would find acceptable.

Evidence of China's interest in and approach to a peaceful solution includes:

- On February 22, 2023, Wang Yi "[stressed](#) that the more complicated the situation is, the more important it is not to give up efforts for peace" during the aforementioned meeting with Vladimir Putin in Moscow. He said China continues to take an "objective fair position", commended Russia's alleged willingness to settle the conflict through dialogue, and stated China would play a "constructive role" in a "political solution to the crisis". Notably, Russian officials have [said](#) China's vision of a "political settlement" (described below) is worth studying but that conditions are not yet right for a peaceful solution.
- Financial Times [reported](#) on February 23, 2023, that a trip by Xi Jinping to Moscow initially announced by Russia was "predicated on his first receiving positive feedback from Russia towards China's call for dialogue and negotiations". Financial Times cites at least 1 anonymous "Chinese official" as saying "Beijing [was] worried that without such confirmation, Putin could use a Xi visit simply to bolster his own standing". Xi Jinping has not visited Russia as of this writing, but will now [reportedly](#) do so in April or May 2023. It is unclear if Russia's [assertion](#) that peace is not yet possible will delay this visit.
- On February 23, 2023, China [abstained](#) from a vote in the UN General Assembly on Resolution A/RES/ES-11/6 in regard to Resolution [A/ES-11/L.7](#) "Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine". China's representative [said](#) the focus should be on achieving "a ceasefire and a secession of hostilities". From China's point of view, the proposal may also have represented a unilateral settlement rather than one which takes into account Russia's expressed security concerns by calling for all of Ukraine's "internationally recognized" territory to be returned to Kyiv. China's leadership has stated it [views](#) Moscow's concerns as legitimate.
- On February 24, 2023, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) [published](#) "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis". The publication is a list of 12 points likely intended to provide a roadmap for achieving a dialogue-based resolution to the war. In the past, China has [indicated](#) it would be willing to act as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine for a ceasefire and supports mediation efforts by other countries.
  - The 12 points of "China's Position" [are](#) 1) respecting the sovereignty of all countries; 2) abandoning the Cold War mentality; 3) ceasing hostilities; 4) resuming peace talks; 5) resolving the humanitarian crisis; 6) protecting civilians and prisoners of war; 7) keeping nuclear power plants safe; 8) reducing strategic risks; 9) facilitating grain exports; 10) stopping unilateral sanctions; 11) keeping industrial and supply chains stable; and 12) promoting post-conflict reconstruction.
  - Points 1, 2, and 10 above on the sovereignty of all countries, "Cold War mentality", and the use of sanctions, respectively, are notable examples of how China likely seeks to use the war in Ukraine to further its own interests. Chinese officials frequently [emphasize](#) the first

when referencing the Taiwan issue. Regarding the latter 2 points, a solution predicated on the non-expansion of “military blocs” (that is, NATO and the US’s global network of alliances) and abandonment of sanctions as a geopolitical tool could create a precedent for China’s opposition to similar activities aimed at itself.

- Point 8 is also noteworthy because it is very likely a repudiation of Vladimir Putin’s [suggestions](#) that Russia could [use](#) nuclear weapons. Point 8 states “nuclear weapons must not be used and nuclear wars must not be fought”, echoing previous statements by China’s leadership to the same effect. In a February 23, 2023, interview with The Atlantic, Antony Blinken [said](#) he “thinks” the US successfully urged countries with more influence in Russia, “like China”, to express their “absolute opposition to any use of nuclear weapons”.
- On February 21, 2023, the MFA [published](#) a concept paper on China’s Global Security Initiative (全球安全倡议). This initiative, originally [proposed](#) in April 2022, espouses many longstanding Chinese government international security concepts that would see the US’s alliance-based security architecture diminish and protect space for the CCP to pursue its domestic policies without “interference”. Based on the new concept paper, the initiative has several points of overlap with China’s position on peace in Ukraine, [including](#) opposing “Cold War mentality, unilateralism, bloc confrontation and hegemonism”, opposing “war and sanctions” in favor of “dialogue and consultation”, opposing the use of nuclear weapons, “taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously”, and upholding the principle of “indivisible security”.

## China Unlikely to Cross US and European Red Lines

**Key Judgment: It is unlikely that China’s leadership will allow Chinese companies to provide to Russia what the US and Europe deem lethal aid.** While Insikt Group believes, as discussed above, that not all company-level activity should be construed as necessarily indicating a state-led effort to actively aid the war, the forms of lethal aid reportedly being considered for transfer to Russia include artillery, artillery shells, and custom-manufactured loitering munitions. Any of these would almost certainly require high-level government approval. This would mark a significant change in China’s approach to the war in Ukraine and an escalation in its support for Russia.

China’s behavior to date, including the political, rhetorical, and non-lethal support described above, suggests it has yet to willingly cross the lethal aid line, likely attempting to balance its priorities and preferences against restrictions imposed by the US and others. Wang Yi and other officials have [expressed](#) an [aversion](#) to sending weapons to either Russia or Ukraine, and stated they will not do so. Before his trip to China was [scuttled](#) due to the spy balloon [incident](#) in early-mid February, Antony Blinken was reportedly [scheduled](#) to meet Xi Jinping, likely indicating that China’s leadership until recently remained interested in stabilizing declining US-China relations. Reports that high-level activities between China and European Union (EU) leaders are being [planned](#) suggest the same is true for China-Europe relations. Additionally, some Chinese analysts (including those at government-affiliated think tanks) [argue](#) the war in Ukraine is detrimental to the development of the EU’s “strategic autonomy” — a development beneficial to China that would see the EU “breaking away from US control”. Contributing lethal aid that prolongs war could therefore harm China’s interests on this

front. Finally, China's leadership almost certainly wants to avoid additional sanctions from the US and EU.

However, there are reasons that could sway China in favor of providing lethal aid. For example, concerns that a complete Russian defeat [could jeopardize](#) the bilateral partnership, either through Vladimir Putin's removal from office or a significant weakening of Russia; an assessment that providing weapons would strengthen Russia's bargaining power for peace negotiations; a belief that there is a way to [conceal](#) the activity from outside observers (namely, the US and EU); the economic benefit from weapons sales; and calculations that providing lethal aid would generate additional political leverage over Russia. Although China's leadership very likely desires stable (if not good) relations with the US and EU, its members are also very likely frustrated, as evidenced by the MFA's recent [publication](#) of a white paper harshly criticizing US hegemony, and it could decide to forgo improved relations in the short-to-mid term. From China's perspective of its own neutrality, a relevant frustration on the issue of restricting "lethal aid" is that Chinese leaders almost certainly [see](#) this demand as hypocritical, given weapons exports to Ukraine by the US and others. Xi Jinping's personal relationship with Vladimir Putin noted above is [another](#) factor that could prompt him (for Xi will ultimately decide) to weigh these or other potential considerations more heavily than the potential consequences, leading to a decision to provide lethal aid.

In Insikt Group's assessment, the reasons to send lethal aid are not as convincing as the reasons to not send lethal aid. Take, for example, what are likely the 2 most compelling potential reasons for China to provide this aid: helping stave off a complete Russian defeat and strengthening Russia so that it has a more powerful bargaining position or the ability to permanently retain territories as a buffer zone (for example, the Donbas and Crimea).<sup>2</sup> China, even in combination with [support provided](#) by countries like Iran and North Korea, would likely need to provide arms and ammunition in great quantities and on a long-term basis to achieve these goals. Given its expressed preference for a peaceful resolution, opposition to escalation, almost certain desire to avoid sanctions, and likely lingering hope for stabilizing China-Western relations, China's leadership is unlikely to involve itself in the war in this manner. Because small or infrequent shipments are unlikely to produce meaningful strategic effects, China's leadership will likely determine the potential benefit does not outweigh the risk.

Evidence of claims that China is considering providing Russia with lethal aid and China's denial includes:

- In a February 19, 2023, interview with NBC News, Antony Blinken [said](#) the US is "very concerned that China is considering providing lethal support" to Russia for the war in Ukraine. There are "various kinds of lethal assistance that they are at least contemplating providing, to include weapons", Blinken stated, adding "we have not seen them cross that line" yet. Blinken said the US is sharing information with US allies, adding that he thought the information would "be out there soon" — very likely meaning made publicly available.
- As part of a media campaign organized around the 1-year anniversary of the war in Ukraine, other US officials have reiterated or commented on Blinken's assertions. These officials include

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<sup>2</sup> China likely does not need the economic benefits from weapons sales badly enough to risk the consequences and its leverage over Russia is likely already strong enough.



US National Security Advisor [Jake Sullivan](#), Central Intelligence Agency Director [William Burns](#), US Secretary of Defense [Lloyd J. Austin III](#) and [President Biden](#), who said he did not expect China to sell weapons to Russia but that there would be consequences if it did. On March 1, 2023, Yahoo News cited 4 anonymous US officials to [report](#) the US is talking with allies about sanctions on China if it provides lethal aid to Russia.

- German officials also reportedly [warned](#) Wang Yi, China's representative to the 2023 Munich Security Conference, where Antony Blinken's statements were first made, that military assistance to Russia would not be tolerated. NATO Chief Jens Stoltenberg reportedly [issued](#) a warning as well.
- On February 23, 2023, German news outlet Der Spiegel [published](#) an article alleging "the Russian military is engaged in negotiations with Chinese drone manufacturer Xi'an Bingo Intelligent Aviation Technology over the mass production of kamikaze [ZT-180] drones for Russia". The ZT-180 drones reportedly "could be similar to that of Iran's Shaheed 136" unmanned aerial vehicle (that is, a loitering munition), and would be delivered to the Russian Ministry of Defense by April 2023". According to Der Spiegel, Xi'an Bingo is producing 100 of these drones and will then "deliver components and know-how to Russia so that the country can produce around 100 drones a month on its own". Citing unnamed "military experts", Der Spiegel asserts the ZT-180 may be "capable of carrying a 35 to 50 kilogram warhead". Xi'an Bingo [told](#) VICE that it "has no commercial contact with Russia".
- On February 24, 2023, 1 or more anonymous US officials speaking with The Wall Street Journal and Washington Post [said](#), respectively, that China is [considering](#) sending "artillery" or "artillery shells" to Russia. The latter article specified that the "aid being contemplated consists of 122-millimeter and 152-millimeter rounds".
- In a February 21, 2023, press conference, a spokesperson for China's MFA [said](#) Antony Blinken's claim that China is considering providing Russia with lethal aid is "fake information" and called on the US to stop providing arms and other military assistance to Ukraine. Also, at the Munich Security Conference, Wang Yi reportedly [told](#) High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell that "China does not provide arms to countries at war", is "not providing arms to Russia", and "will not provide arms to Russia". Prior to the aforementioned UN General Assembly vote, China's representative further [stressed](#) that "sending weapons will not bring peace".
- In a March 2, 2023, [interview with Global Times](#), China's ambassador to the EU said that plans are being developed for European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to visit China in "the first half of 2023". He added that high-level consultation mechanisms, including at the vice premier-level, are being resumed, and that "high-level visits between China and Europe will be very frequent" in the future.

## Outlook

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, China has asserted a form of neutrality that may appear confused and disingenuous to foreign observers with a pro-Ukraine outlook. Insikt Group believes China's pro-Russia attitudes and advocacy for peace in Ukraine is best understood in the context of how China's leaders view — and would like to change — the international system as led by the US. China's

leadership very likely wants the war to end but simultaneously hopes resolution of the conflict can be used to promote its own vision of how to achieve global security more broadly. This vision, as [expressed](#) in “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis”, emphasizes ceasing hostilities, resuming peace talks, resolving humanitarian crises, protecting civilians and prisoners of war, and reducing the risk of escalation to nuclear threats. These issues likely provide starting points from which the Ukraine, the US, Europe, and others could begin collaborating with China for peace. Volodymyr Zelensky [said](#) as much in reply to the publication, also noting he “disagrees with some [of the] proposals” and is focused on “what follows [China’s] words”.

Other aspects of China’s position on a peaceful settlement, however, are almost certainly unacceptable to the US and others. China’s insistence on “abandoning the Cold War mentality” (that is, the use of military blocs) and ending sanctions are the most difficult points, both of which China’s leadership opposes beyond the war in Ukraine. Given that China’s leadership also views Russia’s concerns and reasons for the war as legitimate, meaningful collaboration between Ukraine, the US, and Europe and China for a peaceful end to the war is very likely not possible outside of discrete situations. China reportedly [helped](#) the US urge Vladimir Putin not to use nuclear weapons, for instance.

With such divergent views, relations between China and the US and Europe will almost certainly remain at odds for the duration of the war. China is unlikely to stop providing political and rhetorical support to Russia or cease allowing dual-use trade. It is unlikely that China’s leadership will escalate its support for Russia in the future by approving the provision of lethal aid. If it does, the US and Europe will almost certainly impose consequences, such as sanctions, that would very likely cause a serious deterioration in relations with China for the foreseeable future.

## About the Author

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Devin Thorne is part of Recorded Future's Global Issues Team. His research strives to explain China's security strategies through primary-language sources, with emphasis on propaganda work, maritime security, military-civil fusion, and national defense mobilization. He holds a bachelors from the University of Alabama at Birmingham and a masters from the Hopkins-Nanjing Center for Chinese and American Studies. He speaks Mandarin

## About Insikt Group®

Recorded Future's Insikt Group, the company's threat research division, comprises analysts and security researchers with deep government, law enforcement, military, and intelligence agency experience. Their mission is to produce intelligence that reduces risk for clients, enables tangible outcomes, and prevents business disruption.

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