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'CHINESE CRITICISMS OF CHINA'S SUPPORT TO RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE'

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After the February 4 Summit between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Beijing and 18 days after Russia invaded Ukraine, China has not wavered in its support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine despite urgings by the US and West. Differing views are, however, now beginning to surface internally.

2. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC)'s powerful Propaganda Department has ensured that the Chinese media complies with its policy. The Chinese social media, which doesn't use terms like 'invasion' to describe the Russian action in Ukraine, is awash with posts criticising Ukraine, abuse and offensive remarks against Ukrainians, and criticisms of the West. It has simultaneously got pro-Beijing elements, or those with ties to business interests in China, to spread reports that imposition of sanctions against China will not succeed, or that the EU is talking to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to mediate between Europe, Ukraine and Putin etc. Wang Yi, however, is reported to have made clear that China will not mediate until Europe lifts all sanctions against Russia.

3. At the same time, while doing business with Russia, Chinese officials are trying to ensure that they do not attract US and Western sanctions. Chinese companies operating in Russia are being careful. While Lenovo and Huawei continue to do business in Russia including with Russian government entities, the China National Petroleum Corp. is operationalising the plan -- agreed during the Summit -- to establish a new pipeline with an annual capacity of 10 billion cu. meters while Russia's Gazprom announced (March 1) it had begun work toward construction of the 'Power of Siberia 2' pipeline, which would have an annual capacity of around 50 billion cu. meters. China's coal companies and some banks have, however, temporarily ceased operations for fear of attracting sanctions.

4. But concern about China's stance is apparently mounting in China among its academics and officials. The prospect of US and Western sanctions being enlarged to encompass Chinese entities doing business with China would be worrying. US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo has issued a clear redline to Chinese technology firms that might plan to do business and supply services to Russia, warning that they will be cut off from the services and supplies they need to continue operating.

5. First to be noticed was the statement protesting the Russian invasion of Ukraine issued on February 26 by five Chinese Professors of prestigious Chinese Universities. The statement, which was posted on the Chinese social media was promptly deleted by Chinese censors, but is circulating among Chinese academics in the form of a petition. The five Professors are: (i)

Professor Sun Jiang, Nanjing University; (ii) Professor Wang Lixin, Peking University; (iii) Professor Xu Guoqi, University of Hong Kong; (iv) Professor Zhong Weimin, Tsinghua University; and (v) Professor Chen Yan, Fudan University. Their statement said "The international community was shocked that a permanent member of the United Nations, a major power with nuclear weapons, would fight against a weaker brother" and that "Great catastrophes in history often started with local conflicts". It said "We strongly appeal to the Russian government and to President Putin to stop this war and settle the dispute through negotiations. Power politics will not only destroy the achievements of civilization and the principles of international justice, but will also bring great shame and disaster to the Russian nation. Peace begins with the desire of the human heart. We oppose unjust wars". While the statement does not directly criticise Chinese President Xi Jinping, it is an implicit criticism of Chinese support to Russia and the Professors are likely to be penalised.

6. More such negative sentiments were expressed soon thereafter in an 'open letter' circulated on WeChat on March 3. Over 200 alumni of China's prestigious Tsinghua University, most of whom live in China, called on the university to strip Putin of an honorary doctorate awarded in 2019.

7. Interestingly, two recent articles expressing contradictory views on China and the ongoing war in Ukraine suggest that deliberations are underway in the CCP's upper echelons. Prominent are those by Hu Wei and Wang Xiangsui. In his article Hu Wei, Vice Chairman of the Public Policy Research Center of the Counselor's Office of the State Council, Chairman of the Shanghai Public Policy Research Association, Chairman of the Academic Committee of the Charhar Institute and a Professor and doctoral supervisor, expressed strong reservations about China's present policy. By March 7, the original post had been viewed 185,834 times and been recycled by numerous outlets. The second is by Wang Xiangsui, retired People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force Colonel and co-author of the best-selling book 'Unrestricted Warfare'. Published in Ouzhou Yanjiu [European Studies] under the title "Interpreting the Ukraine crisis from dual perspectives - the interweaving of geopolitics and geo-currency politics" on March 6, it topped Aisixiang's daily ratings before slipping to second position by March 11.

8. In his article titled 'The Possible Outcome of the Russia-Ukraine War and China's Choice', Hu Wei, argued that China needs to safeguard its own national interests and cease supporting Russia. He emphasised 'The bottom line is to prevent the United States and the West from jointly sanctioning China'. Stating that Putin's plans for a *blitzkrieg* have clearly failed, Russia is fast getting isolated, and events are leading towards a World War, he unequivocally recommended that China needs to cut ties with Putin in the 'next one or two weeks' and 'give up neutrality'.

9. Hu Wei assessed there is a 'high probability' that the Russian-Ukrainian war may escalate beyond Ukraine to become a World War even include the possibility of a nuclear strike. Stating that the only way out for Putin is to have peace negotiations where Ukraine makes concessions, he said this will be difficult unless Kyiv is captured. More importantly, he said, it is not in Putin's character to withdraw and this will make it impossible for the US and West to stay out of the war. He anticipated that the US and Russia will also have a final confrontation, and since Russia's military strength will not be able to match that of NATO,

Putin will lose even more. Even the capture of Kyiv would not mean the end of the war since a Government-in-exile would be formed regardless of whether Zelensky is alive or not.

10. Hu Wei said a protracted war would have major strategic repercussions. As the Russian people face increasing hardships with Western sanctions reaching an unprecedented level and impacting the domestic economy and people's livelihood, the anti-war and anti-Putin forces will get mobilised raising the possibility of a mutiny. He assessed that if Putin is removed due to civil strife, coup d'etat or other reasons, Russia will succumb to the West, or even be further dismembered. Russia's status as a great power will come to an end.

11. He anticipated an "Iron Curtain" again dividing the Western-dominated camp and its competitors. With the West drawing the line between democracies and dictatorships, confrontation with Russia will be defined as a struggle between democracy and dictatorship. This will have an effect on other countries: 'the US Indo-Pacific strategy will be consolidated' and Japan and other countries will draw even closer to the US. 'The power of the West will increase significantly, NATO will continue to expand, and the influence of the United States in the non-Western world will also increase, more third world countries will embrace the West and the West will have more "hegemony" in terms of military, values and institutions, and its hard power and soft power will reach new heights'. The United States and Europe will 'form a community of shared future more closely', and US leadership in the Western world will be paramount.

12. Disagreeing with the view that the US will not focus on China because of preoccupation in Europe, he warned that in such an eventuality China will be more isolated. He reiterated that if China does not take measures to actively respond, it will face further containment from the US and West. China will become the main target for strategic containment and Europe will cut itself off from China even more. He added that 'Japan will become the vanguard of anti-China, South Korea will further fall to the United States, Taiwan will join the anti-China 'chorus' and China will face not only the military encirclement of the United States and NATO, QUAD (US-Japan-India-Australia Quadrilateral Alliance), and AUKUS, but also challenges from Western values and systems'.

13. Retired PLAAF Colonel Wang Xiangsui traced the background of the 'major geopolitical' dispute in Ukraine. He said Ukraine is important as the main energy link between Russia and Europe and is a major safeguard for Russia as a European and world power. He ascribed the current conflict to the rivalry between the West and Russia over Ukraine, contention in Ukraine between pro-Western and pro-Russian forces, effort by Western European powers to squeeze Russia's strategic space, and repeated US efforts to challenge Russia's hegemony which have left Russia with no choice but to retaliate. Wang Xiangsui discerned the appearance of three major economic circles in the world economic system: (i) the Eurozone with internal trade exceeding 70 percent; (ii) the US-dominated North American; and (iii) the East Asian, mainly comprising of China and ASEAN states. This, according to him, challenges US global hegemony.

14. Stating that it is the scene of big power rivalry and all the powers have made mistakes and underestimated their opponents, he said the Ukrainian crisis will 'remain in manageable tension constrained by multiple factors, thus becoming a lasting 'ulcer surface' affecting Europe'.

15. Wang Xiangsui explained that ‘the Ukraine incident undermines the foundation of Europe-Russia cooperation, returning a marginalised NATO to Europe’s centre stage and giving the US an important political-economic lever there’. Assessing that Europe faces long-term chaos in Ukraine, he said it will need to invest more resources to meet new security challenges. This will cause long-term harm to its economic development and security. He assessed that the crisis had further promoted Sino-Russian cooperation, describing it as ‘hugely significant’ for ‘curbing global hegemony and promoting multi-polarisation’. He also listed various new areas of cooperation. Underscoring that China is a big manufacturing country, while Russia is the most resource-rich country in the world in need of a stable market, he identified long-term guarantee for China’s energy supply as one important area. Asserting that the US Asia-Pacific strategy will be constrained by the Ukraine issue, he described the Asia-Pacific region as the economic center of the future world. He said US policies will inevitably lead to the intensification of the contradiction between Europe and the US, but the US national strength is not as before. If the US confronts Russia, China and Europe, it will make a ‘strategic mistake of making enemies everywhere’.

16. In conclusion, Wang Xiangsui said America’s performance in the Ukraine incident shows that it is no longer the ‘solitary superpower, but only one of several major power centers in the world’. He did not expect that the Ukrainian crisis will be resolved as per the wishes of the US, but as a result of multilateral deliberation.

17. The publication of the two articles by prominent Chinese points to discussion gaining ground inside China regarding the merits of China aligning itself so closely with Putin and Russia. China’s leadership seems to have allowed expression of the divergent views. The statements of protest by the academics suggest that a wide section of Chinese academics, including probably businessmen, feel the US is more powerful than Russia and are apprehensive that the US and the West may target China with sanctions. Millions of CCP members and their families will be similarly apprehensive. Large swathes of China’s academia have blamed Chinese President Xi Jinping since 2017 for the policy towards US. Uncontrolled public discussion of China-US relations, or in case China is targeted by sanctions, it could make things very difficult for Xi Jinping at the upcoming 20th Party Congress.

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