

DIPLOMACY

China's Reaction to Ukraine-Russia Conflict Peace Talks

On 14 February, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi gave a speech at the Munich Security Conference, in which he called for all parties involved in the Russia-Ukraine conflict to engage in peace talks. Wang emphasised that Europe has a crucial role to play in resolving the crisis given that the conflict occurs on European soil.^{1 2 3} Moreover, he stated that a resolution should be "a collective effort that leads to a balanced and sustainable security framework for long-term peace in Europe".⁴ Throughout his remarks, Wang Yi reiterated that China views itself as a peace-oriented nation, highlighting its status as the largest contributor of peacekeeping personnel among UN Security Council permanent members and as the second-largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping operations.^{5 6}

On the same day, Wang Yi also reportedly met with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the sidelines of the conference.⁷ The Chinese official readout of the meeting quoted Stoltenberg as expressing that NATO "attaches great importance to China's influence and role" and hopes that China will play an important role in achieving a peaceful resolution to the conflict.⁸ Meanwhile, Wang reaffirmed China's commitment to promoting a political solution and building a sustainable European security framework.^{10 11 12} Additionally, he expressed hope for NATO to maintain a 'rational stance' and to develop a responsible policy towards China.^{13 14 15}

Subsequently, on 18 February, as bilateral discussions began in Riyadh between Russian and American diplomats on the conflict in Ukraine, China reiterated its call for "all concerned parties" to be involved in peace negotiations, while simultaneously welcoming the talks and the broader exploration of avenues for restoring diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Russia.^{16 17 18} At a regular press conference in Beijing, when questioned directly about the talks scheduled in Riyadh, Guo Jiakun, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said "We welcome all efforts aimed at peace [...] at the same time, we hope that all parties involved and stakeholders will participate in the negotiation process in a timely manner".^{19 20 21}

Adarga Analysis:

Both Wang Yi's remarks and China's broader reaction to recent diplomatic developments in the Russia-Ukraine conflict reflect a strategic effort to balance its own geopolitical and geo-economic interests whilst augmenting existing efforts to project itself as a 'responsible global actor'.

Generally, in its coverage, Chinese state media pointedly refrained from contrasting China's approach to Europe at Munich directly with that of the U.S. articulated by Vice President J.D. Vance. However, in a sense, they did not need to. The contrast between the speeches of Wang Yi and J.D. Vance was striking, and the clear juxtaposition of the two was complemented by more subtle comparisons, both conveyed in the language used by Chinese officials as well as by the framing provided throughout by its state media apparatus.

In his speech, Vance made a series of inflammatory remarks. He accused Europe of regressing on issues such as freedom of speech and immigration while largely avoiding the topic of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, a notable omission given the conference's focus on security issues in Europe, including the ongoing war in Ukraine.²² Wang Yi meanwhile, by calling for peace at Munich, and repeatedly asserting the importance of the participation of "all concerned parties", was likely aiming to position China as both a key diplomatic player in the conflict's resolution, and more generally as a stabilising force in international affairs. Furthermore, by framing the conflict as one that should be resolved by European stakeholders (rather than solely by external actors such as the U.S.), he was able to implicitly distance Beijing from Washington's assertive involvement while simultaneously appealing to European audiences and their concerns directly.

This reflects a broader calculus being made by China in which it is seeking to balance often competing political and economic considerations across several of its key bilateral relationships – including Russia and Ukraine, but also with European countries and the United States – to preserve its own strategic interests. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, despite Western sanctions, China has increased cooperation in energy and technology sectors with Russia.²³ However, it would be an oversimplification to interpret China's approach to-date as one of outright alignment with Russia. Simultaneously, China almost certainly recognises that prolonged conflict in Ukraine threatens regional stability and has the potential to endanger its investments and trade routes whether by direct disruption or by the threat of secondary sanctions. Therefore, although China benefits to some extent from a weakened Russia that remains dependent on Chinese trade and diplomacy, it is also likely keen to avoid alienating Europe and countries in the Global South by being perceived as a Russian enabler. Consequently, we interpret Beijing's position on its relationship with Moscow as a delicate balancing act, in which it is seeking to preserve strategic ties without fully endorsing Russian actions. This requires China to consistently advocate for peace while attempting to ensure that any proposed settlement does not significantly weaken its own geopolitical standing.

Geopolitically, this is also largely a continuation of China's pre-existing approach to peace efforts related to the Ukraine conflict. In February 2023, on the first anniversary of Russia's invasion, China released a 12-point peace plan which emphasised Europe's role in any conflict resolution process. This also aligns with China's broader approach to global governance, and especially its desire to portray itself as a pragmatic actor and responsible global power.²⁴ Wang Yi's speech references to China's contributions to UN peacekeeping and his diplomatic engagement with NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg underscore this effort further.

China's response to the Riyadh discussions on 18 February almost certainly served a similar purpose. By welcoming any effort aimed at peace, but also stressing the necessity of involving all stakeholders, Chinese officials once again presented a veiled critique of U.S.-led negotiations that do not include Ukraine directly. Again, this likely serves a dual purpose, allowing China to undermine U.S. influence, and advance the perception of its own neutral stance publicly while mitigating the risk that Russia perceives Beijing as aligning with Europe against Moscow.

Indeed, China's positioning here extends beyond Ukraine to this broader global strategy. Its emphasis on diplomatic engagement, mediation, and multipolarity is also evident in its response to the Israel-Gaza conflict. Beijing has repeatedly called for ceasefires, humanitarian aid, and a two-state solution, reinforcing its image as a responsible global power. On 18 February, while Russia-U.S. discussions took place in Saudi Arabia, Wang Yi chaired an open debate at the UN Security Council in New York entitled "Practicing Multilateralism, Reforming, and Improving Global Governance", providing an opportunity to highlight China's three global initiatives on development, security and civilisation as 'China's solution' to improving governance of the world.²⁵ He reportedly made references to the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, but also made a statement of solidarity with countries in the Global South in support of multipolarity, asserting that international affairs should not be "monopolised by a small number of countries" and that Global South countries "have the right to raise and safeguard their legitimate interests".²⁶

By linking its approach to Ukraine with other global conflicts and issues, China is seeking to differentiate itself from the United States, which it portrays as interventionist and militarily aggressive. This diplomatic positioning has the potential to strengthen Beijing's appeal, especially among non-Western nations, thereby enhancing its credibility as a global power advocating for a more balanced international order. It is increasingly likely that if American rhetoric remains more inflammatory and partisan, and the fledgling rapprochement between the U.S. and Russia continues, countries across several geographies will begin to consider China to be a more stable and reliable actor on the global stage. Including those more closely aligned with the United States.

ABOUT

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