

# USALI Perspectives

## February 24: A Clarifying Moment for China's Foreign Policy

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States rarely make sudden shifts in foreign policy. China has been transitioning in baby steps from occasional US partner to norm challenger over the past 15 years, beginning in 2007 when it started joining Russia in vetoing UN Security Council resolutions about the Syrian civil war. But Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 has abruptly propelled China much further down the path of policy confrontation with the US outside of Asia.

A few things are becoming more clear: beyond defending its "core interests" on matters such as the status of Taiwan and navigation in the South China Sea, China is motivated and prepared to

oppose US global leadership generally, *especially* whenever Washington seeks to impose sanctions on other nations or strengthen its security alliances anywhere in the world. It's simple: Chinese leaders worry about someday being in Putin's position and are taking steps to prevent and prepare for such an outcome.

This explains the otherwise baffling vehemence with which China has verbally backed Russia in its invasion, even though China had no quarrel with Ukraine and normally would oppose a big country violating the territorial sovereignty of a small neighbor. In the not-too-distant past, we would have expected to see China mostly stand on

the sidelines of a dispute in which it had no direct interest, abstaining from criticizing Russia but also not endorsing and amplifying Russia's position.

We saw instances of this familiar behavior early in the war. At the first UN Security Council vote on February 25, Western diplomats were relieved when [China merely abstained](#) from voting on a resolution that demanded Russia's withdrawal, leaving Russia to cast its veto alone and achieving the desired psychological effect of isolating it. China also [abstained on March 2](#) when a majority at the UN General Assembly demanded that Russia withdraw, and [again on March 24](#) when the General Assembly criticized Russia for creating a "dire humanitarian situation." On March 4, [China abstained](#) when a majority at the UN Human Rights Council [created a Commission of Inquiry](#) to investigate alleged Russian abuses of human rights in Ukraine.

But China soon began actively casting its vote with Russia:

- On March 16, the Chinese judge at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) joined the Russian judge in dissenting when the 13 other judges ordered Russia to halt military operations in Ukraine. Ukraine had asked the court to rule that Russia's ostensible justification for invading – alleged Ukrainian

genocide against ethnic Russians in Ukraine – was false and was itself a violation of the 1948 Genocide Convention. While expressing support for an end to military operations, the [Chinese judge expressed doubts](#) about ICJ jurisdiction and said that "the measures that the Russian Federation is solely required to take will not contribute to the resolution of the crisis in Ukraine."

- On March 23, [China supported a Russian resolution](#) at the Security Council that called for civilian protection and access for humanitarian assistance in Ukraine. All other council members abstained, viewing the proposal as a Russian attempt to justify its aggression.
- On April 7, China [voted against](#) a UN General Assembly resolution to suspend Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council following the discovery of atrocities against civilians in Bucha.
- On April 26, [China voted against a General Assembly measure](#) requiring the body to meet within 10 days of a Security Council veto to discuss the vetoed resolution.
- On May 12, [China voted against a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council](#) directing the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on

Ukraine to investigate possible war crimes and violations of human rights.

- On May 24, [China began a joint military exercise with Russia](#), conducting aerial patrols over the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan while the Quad (the US, Japan, Australia, and India) held a summit in Japan.
- On May 26, China joined Russia at the Security Council in [vetoing new sanctions against North Korea](#) in response to its ballistic missile tests. On the same day at the World Health Organization, China [voted against](#) a resolution that condemned Russia for creating a health emergency in Ukraine.

While having no impact on the substantive outcomes, China's votes undermined US efforts to isolate Russia and signaled China's desire to not just abstain from US-led diplomacy but obstruct it.

What changed? After February 24, China saw the US – so recently in retreat in Afghanistan – reclaim the mantle of defender of the free world and rally allies to impose unexpectedly severe sanctions against Russia. China, itself the target of extensive US sanctions related to trade, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, has long been unhappy with Washington's fondness for sanctions,

particularly when imposed outside the UN.

After February, China also saw the US dramatically increase its [military presence in Europe](#), Germany [boost its military budget](#), and Japan [discuss plans to do the same](#). US security blocs in Europe and Asia, particularly [NATO](#) and [the Quad](#), openly named China as the next threat. We should not be surprised that China would regard disruption of US-led sanctions and security blocs as important foreign policy objectives in their own right.

During the spring China proposed two new pieces of collective security architecture, the [China-Pacific Islands Common Development Vision](#) and the [Global Security Initiative \(GSI\)](#). Both call for “common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security.” A key idea infusing these proposals and Chinese statements about the war in Ukraine generally is that states should not be completely free to form security alliances, but [must take into account the security perceptions of other states](#). This idea is the basis for China's (and Russia's) accusation that the US actually caused the war by expanding NATO eastward to Russia's borders, thereby making Russia feel insecure. In his [April 21 speech](#) introducing the GSI, President Xi Jinping said the initiative would “oppose the pursuit of one's own security at the cost of others' security; stay committed to peacefully resolving

differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation ... reject double standards, and oppose the wanton use of unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction.”

There is no evidence that China wants to dismantle the UN system. On the contrary, the GSI calls for safeguarding the “UN-centered international system,” which it has become adept at navigating. Rather, China hopes to do in the realm of diplomacy and security what it has already done in economic relations and trade: establish additional institutions and forums that target the priorities of the developing world. We can think of the GSI as a companion concept to the development-focused Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which when launched a decade ago was equally vague but gained substance through implementation. Most importantly, both the GSI and BRI have the potential to buffer China against the effects of future sanctions by the US and its allies if Beijing-Washington relations continue to worsen. Another way of looking at the GSI is as China’s response to [Robert Zoellick’s famous 2005 invitation](#) to

become a responsible global stakeholder: [as Chinese commentators explain](#), it is sharing public goods from COVID vaccines to development loans to a model of international relations and economic development that eliminates pressure to become a liberal democracy.

The war in Ukraine is unlikely to have fundamentally altered China’s view of the US and the world, but it has accelerated – and illuminated – China’s progress down the path it already was on. If this analysis is accurate, we should expect China to increasingly take positions counter to those of the US with respect to matters beyond Asia, even when there is no obvious “core interest” of China at stake. Weakening Washington’s global leadership – specifically its sanctioning power and use of alliances to project power around the world – is itself a new Chinese core interest. The space for occasional low-key cooperation with the US on the basis of shared interests has become vanishingly small.



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