

After the Russian “Ruse,” China Looks for New Friends

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Less than two weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Chinese President Xi Jinping hosted Vladimir Putin at the opening of the Winter Olympics in Beijing. The display of unity left an impression in the West of the emergence of a new axis facing the United States. But the Russian invasion of Ukraine put China in a problematic position, in which the West considers it a partner in an “axis of evil,” or at least responsible for the continuation of this axis. This article examines the possible lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war for Chinese foreign policy and their implications for the Middle East.

Despite the warnings given by Moscow and the deployment of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border, to some extent the Russian invasion caught the world by surprise, although at least one country, China, allegedly knew about the Russian intentions in advance. Less than two weeks before the invasion, Chinese President Xi Jinping hosted President Vladimir Putin at the opening of the Winter Olympics in Beijing. The display of unity left an impression in the West of the emergence of a new axis facing the United States. Contrary to claims that President Xi asked/demanded his good friend Putin to postpone the invasion until the end of the Olympics, there have been growing estimates that China did not know of the Russian intentions, certainly not in full. Moreover, it appears that Beijing was also mistaken in its assessment of the situation after the outbreak of war, and while the cannons were roaring, China found itself caught up in its own struggle – over its status as a responsible power, the continuation of its relations with Europe and the United States, and most important, the image and status of the ruling Communist Party among the Chinese public.

Indeed, the war thrust China into a problematic situation. On the one hand, not long ago the Chinese and Russian presidents signed [deals](#) worth \$117.5 billion for the supply of gas and oil for 25 years and more, while declaring a partnership with “no limits,” which in essence means opposition to the United States. On the other hand, Russia blatantly violated declared

Chinese principles, including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as non-interference in the domestic affairs of another country. If Beijing openly sides with the West against Russia, it will find it hard to explain the change in its belligerent policy against the United States, while fostering nationalist feelings among its inhabitants. Support for Russia, however, could threaten its important relations with Europe and the United States, as well as the image China seeks to cultivate as a responsible power that promotes world peace. And above all, the Chinese Communist Party worries about risking its status at home.

Six thousand Chinese citizens, many of them students, were trapped in Ukraine when their government failed to tell them to leave in good time. Only one day after the invasion were the trapped citizens instructed to leave, and were told to display the Chinese flag on their vehicles in the hope that this would help them survive the shelling of refugee convoys. The fleeing Chinese quickly found that not only did the flag fail to help, but it also actually identified them as citizens of a country that supports the invading enemy. To the fear and confusion of war were added fears from Ukrainian citizens who did not hide their displeasure with Beijing's declarations. The suffering of the Chinese trapped in Ukraine did not end when they managed to cross the border, where they found that China provided rescue flights, but at a high price. The fears, suffering, and anger of these Chinese refugees reached the social media in China. Some wondered how their country can send millions of dollars of humanitarian aid to other countries and not take care of its own citizens in times of crisis. Others openly criticized the Beijing government, which failed to advise its citizens to leave before the war started. For the moment, the Chinese censors are managing to control these voices, but the whole incident has struck at the soft underbelly of the Communist Party, which is very concerned about domestic public protest.

The Beijing government is observing closely and drawing conclusions. The first lesson: it is not possible to rely on Russia and Putin, who dragged China into this quagmire. The second lesson: the West is united and strong, certainly more than was thought. If President Xi had any doubts on this

matter, President Biden, in a telephone conversation with his Chinese counterpart, specified how in certain scenarios the West would also take steps against China. Consequently, the idea of a Chinese-Russian axis against the United States is no longer so attractive to Beijing. The question therefore arises, what will China do in the long term? While this is hard to predict, China's past behavior is instructive. In the mid-1950s, relations between China and the Soviet Union deteriorated due to ideological differences, which led Mao Zedong to change the policy of "reliance on one side," which he endorsed with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. But breaking off relations with Moscow did not cause Mao to turn to the United States as a substitute, but rather to abandon both these powers in favor of a third option – the Middle East.

China today is no longer Mao's China, and the Middle East has also changed. But in certain ways, the current conditions in the region provide China with a more convenient base for action than in the past. China is an economic power, with numerous investments in the region and significant trade volume that is steadily increasing. It provides the countries of the Middle East with an opportunity to take part in its visionary global Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), and for some of these countries, the Beijing governing model is also attractive. Some Middle East countries even see China as a substitute (if only partial) for the United States, which rebukes them over human rights issues and constantly presents new demands in this regard.

Against this background, Chinese officials [believe](#) that the mutual dependence between China and the Middle East is growing stronger and will continue to grow, and that China has an unprecedented opportunity in the region. Moreover, they feel that the countries of the region are "looking eastward" as American influence declines. This argument is reinforced by the fact that United States demands to limit Chinese investments are falling on deaf ears in the Middle East. For example, deals for 5G networks from the Chinese company Huawei have been signed with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Chinese-controlled ports are operating or are under construction in both these US allies, which have also received numerous Chinese investments in the fields of energy, infrastructures, and advanced

technologies. Saudi Arabia and the UAE (twice!) turned down a direct request from President Biden to increase their oil production in order to exert further pressure on Putin.

It appears that China, which in any case wants to strengthen its ties with the Middle East, could be encouraged to pursue this goal with greater intensity following the insights and lessons it derives from the war in Ukraine. For Israel, whose relations with some Arab countries have improved significantly since the signing of the Abraham Accords, increasing Chinese involvement in the region could be an opportunity for collaboration between Israeli and Chinese companies on a variety of regional projects. On the other hand, the new situation could also entail risks of possible military cooperation between China and Middle Eastern countries, whether this refers to the construction of facilities to manufacture advanced military technologies, or the growing military presence of China itself, seeking to protect its interests. In addition, technological collaboration between Israel and China, whether directly or indirectly through other Middle East companies, could be an opening for technology transfer that will threaten Israel's relations with its close friend, the United States. Therefore, Israel must carefully select possible desirable areas for cooperation with China and promote them, while excluding more problematic areas.