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How Russia has put itself at China's mercy

China's neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine conflict does not come for free. How Russian experts view the relationship with the People's Republic

The invasion of Ukraine has led to Russia's isolation. Just a few states continue to stand by Moscow. In the UN Security Council, only China voted in favour of a Russian resolution on Ukraine, which recognised the country's humanitarian needs but did not consider the events a war of aggression. In contrast, a Ukrainian proposal that clearly condemned Russia as the invader was passed with an overwhelming majority. The Middle Kingdom abstained from the vote. Instead, it urged a diplomatic solution to the conflict. Does this give Beijing room to manoeuvre between the hardened fronts?

In an interview with us, the leading Russian China expert Alexei Maslov, who heads the Institute for Asian and African Countries at the Russian Academy of Sciences, pointed out the noticeable increase in anti-American rhetoric in China. He believes that within days of the start of the war, Beijing had already devised a strategy on how to respond to the Russian invasion.

In the spirit of the philosopher and military strategist Sunzi, the People's Republic is trying to solve its own problems: China is spreading the idea that the US is behind the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and that it is also fuelling the Taiwan conflict. 'With this perspective, China manages to avoid a clear response to Russia's actions on the one hand, while preserving its own domestic political narrative on the other. Furthermore, China retains its profitable trade relations with the West,' Maslov said.

Andrei Kortunov, Director General of the Russian Council on Foreign Relations, also does not believe that Beijing holds an absolutely neutral stance. The Taiwan conflict and trade relations with Ukraine keep it from unilaterally supporting Russia, he says. But when it comes to the conflict between Russia and the West, China – with its position of

'benevolent neutrality' – is definitely on Russia's side, Kortunov argues.

Roots in Chinese history

Other Russian analysts agree. Military and Asia expert Vassily Kashin of the Russian Academy of Sciences thinks China avoids criticising Moscow, while at the same time indirectly blaming the West for NATO expansion and unwillingness to address Russian security concerns. Kashin sees no sign that China is even considering putting pressure on Moscow to arrive at a quick peace agreement.

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For Alexei Maslov, Russia plays a key position in China's strategic thinking – not only as a trading partner or as a raw material supplier, but as a political partner that shares the resentment towards the West as well as the value of subordinating the individual to the state. 'The idea of Chinese independence was formed in the 19th century and lives in the subconscious of many Chinese,' Maslov explains. The resentment towards the West is, in his opinion, something like 'a national idea'. Moscow knows how to cultivate these national feelings among the Chinese.

For Maslov, one error of US policy is to see China only as a 'country of merchants' that can be dissuaded from supporting Russia with concessions on tariffs. In reality, China, is a country of warriors who do not fight with military means. Just as the occupation of territories in Chinese history was a consequence of China's economic policy, Beijing has also been waging an economic war against the US. Tariff concessions might have satisfied Beijing 20 years ago. Now that it is striving for a political victory, that is no longer enough. Russia is now seen as a partner that is clearly not economically threatening, but politically rewarding.

The price of Chinese support

Many Russians are wondering whether Beijing will eventually present Moscow with a hefty bill for its tacit support in the Ukraine war. 'The more countries put pressure through sanctions on Russia, the more China will demand. But the stronger the political and military relations between Russia and China will become,' Maslov says. 'But without a real military alliance. Because then Russia would also have to take ownership of the Taiwan issue.'

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Andrei Kortunov also does not believe that the intensification of military-technical cooperation will lead down such a path. Russia and China are critical of the traditional model of a military alliance. They consider it outdated. It's possible to perform the same functions more efficiently. The Russian market, which many Western suppliers are currently fleeing, is attractive for China, says Kortunov. He predicts that there will be an aggressive policy by Chinese companies here, especially in the automotive industry and consumer electronics. This process had already begun before the war and the accompanying upheavals, he says.

Kortunov also expects more Russian-Chinese cooperation in the public sector, for example in state-owned enterprises. During President Putin's visit to Beijing in early February, the oil company Rosneft signed a contract with the Chinese energy giant CNPC to supply 100 million tonnes of oil over ten years. According to Kortunov, this gives Russia's ambitions to diversify its oil and gas exports a massive boost. However, this also requires new infrastructure.

At China's mercy

Maslov observes a growing demand for gas in China. There is an agreement to build a gas pipeline called Sila Sibiri 2 ('Power of Siberia 2') from Russia via Mongolia to China. Of all the forms of Russia's dependence on China, Maslow finds that Chinese technologies are the most problematic. Here, too, there is no alternative – almost all Western high-tech companies are leaving Russia. Maslov expects Sino-Russian joint ventures to emerge in Russia and Chinese companies to set up production facilities in the country. The rouble's dependence on the yuan will grow when Russian banks, after being excluded from the SWIFT system, join the Chinese competing system for fast payments (CIPS), whose structure is hidden from the West.

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According to Maslov, Russia's isolation from the West is tying the country more closely to China. A paradox of the sanctions is that Russia is, in a sense, at China's mercy. Despite all the treaties, Russia has so far not shared its most valuable pieces with China. And China has so far invested less in Russia than in the US. 'If China is at least silent on Ukraine, many

> Russians might perceive that positively and anti-Chinese sentiment in the Far East would be pushed back somewhat,' Maslow said. With Western sanctions directed not only against oligarchs, but against Russia as a whole, there would be an explosive mixture that could ultimately strengthen the Sino-Russian alliance. And this could become very aggressive in the long run.

'There is no question of charity and love of one's neighbour here,' warns Kortunov. China will implement projects in Russia that reflect the interests of the People's Republic. In a way, the Chinese market is even more competitive for the Russians than the Western market. Unfortunately, the view in Moscow is that cooperation with China could offer an alternative to the US dollar: 'The Chinese will come and solve our problems.' But Kortunov is sure: that will not happen.



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