

China's diplomatic game over the 'peace plan'

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On 24 February 2023, the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China revealed a twelve-point document entitled 'China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis'. In the document, Beijing proposes to: respect the sovereignty and integrity of all states; recognise the doctrine of indivisible security and reject the 'military bloc mentality'; cease the hostilities and avoid fanning the conflict; resume peace talks; resolve the humanitarian crisis; protect civilians and prisoners of war (POWs); keep the nuclear power plants safe; refrain from using nuclear weapons; facilitate grain exports; stop imposing unilateral sanctions; keep industrial and supply chains stable; promote post-conflict reconstruction.

As part of political preparations for the presentation of the Chinese proposals, on 14–22 February 2023 Wang Yi, a member of the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Central Committee, travelled to Europe. He visited France and Italy, attended the Security Conference in Munich, moved on to Hungary, and then flew to Moscow. In France, he met with President Emmanuel Macron, in Italy he was received by Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani and President Sergio Mattarella. He held numerous meetings on the sidelines of the conference in Munich: for example with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, with the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, and with Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. He also held informal talks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. On 21 February 2023, the Chinese MFA also published the Global Security Initiative concept (which had been initiated in 2022 by China's Chairman Xi Jinping).

In response to the government in Beijing revealing their peace plan, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said that Ukraine has devised its own proposal on how to resolve the conflict with Russia, in the form of a so-called ten-point peace formula which – according to him – should form the basis for negotiations. However, he assessed "China's initiative to launch talks on Ukraine" positively and expressed his readiness to hold a meeting with the Chinese leadership to convince them to support the Ukrainian peace plan. Alongside this, he warned that any potential alliance between China and Russia would mean the beginning of a world war. The chairman of the Ukrainian parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee and member of the Servant of the People ruling party Oleksandr Merezhko criticised the Chinese proposals and referred to them as "a set of empty slogans" which bear the hallmark of a "propaganda-like provocation".

Several days before China presented its stance, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had announced that the United States had evidence indicating that Chinese-Russian

negotiations on weapons deliveries to Russia were at an advanced stage. On 23 February, the German weekly *Der Spiegel* published a report on talks regarding Russia's plans to purchase combat drones manufactured by a Chinese company. Kyiv is yet to comment on the media reports suggesting that Beijing may have provided Moscow with military assistance.

Commentary

- Contrary to media speculation, the Chinese proposals should not be viewed as a genuine and credible peace plan. The communiqué published by Beijing contains a fundamental contradiction between a reference to the United Nations Charter and the principle of the inviolability of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states on the one hand, and the so-called principle of indivisible security on the other. Both the document and the Global Security Initiative promote the latter principle. It *de facto* grants regional powers, such as China and Russia, the right to veto in matters relating to the plans of smaller and medium-sized states to join military and economic alliances. Moreover, Beijing has not offered to act as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine, it has not proposed any action agenda and has not commented on the withdrawal of Russian troops from the occupied territories. It has merely formulated a vague appeal for a ceasefire and a resumption of peace talks as soon as possible. Furthermore, it has not specified the target of most of its proposals, which creates the impression that both sides of the conflict bear equal responsibility for the war. Beijing continues to refrain from referring to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a war, using only the word “crisis” throughout the entire document. This means that the presented stance is intended to help China to pursue a number of its political interests. However, the resolution of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict is not one of these interests.
- It seems that Beijing's initiative is aimed at undermining the West's unity not only in the context of the war in Ukraine, but also in other aspects related to the increasing Chinese-American rivalry. When promoting the Chinese stance on Ukraine during his recent trip to Europe, Wang Yi repeatedly called on his interlocutors to step up “Europe's strategic autonomy”, which China interprets as the EU loosening its close cooperation with the United States. The visits to France and Italy were a continuation of the initiatives launched during the G20 summit held in November 2022 in Bali, when French President Emmanuel Macron and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni announced their intention to pay a visit to China in the coming months. In order to partly restore China's relations with the West, during the G20 Bali summit Chairman Xi Jinping skilfully played on the hopes for peace that the West cherished at that time, as well as on Beijing's opposition to the potential use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine (see '[A tactical pause in relations with the West: China plays on hopes for peace](#)'). The German government's spokesperson enthusiastically commented on China's initiative and on its strong reaction to Russia's nuclear threats. However, he emphasised that the Chinese stance on Ukraine lacks certain essential elements, for example it fails to call for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine nor does it include the intention to discuss the plan directly with Kyiv. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock went a step further and called on Beijing to present a plan for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the UN forum. She suggested that “the easiest way for China would be to recognise the right to self-defence

and, above all, to make it clear to Russia that the ban on the use of force applies to all countries of the world". This means that Germany's stance *de facto* equates to challenging the credibility of the current formula of China's plan.

- China's proposals are also a form of indirect political support for Russia. This is because one of them involves Beijing calling for the lifting of "unilateral sanctions", i.e. those which had not been imposed on the basis of a resolution of the UN Security Council (in which Russia has the right to veto). China's appeal to "avoid fanning the flames" can also be interpreted as a suggestion that arms supplies to Ukraine should be stopped, which Beijing has repeatedly advocated for. In the political aspect, despite the fact that the document does not actually mention NATO, it echoes Russian propaganda messages claiming that NATO enlargement was the underlying cause of the conflict in Ukraine. In this context, China has critically remarked that "the security of a region should not be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs". It should be expected that Beijing will use the failure of the Chinese 'peace initiative' to launch propaganda attacks on the United States and its allies, in which it will accuse the West of war mongering and benefiting from the ongoing conflict.
- The Chinese authorities are also using their peace proposal to pursue their political interests in their relations with the Global South. The document mentions issues such as grain exports, supply chains and sanctions, which should be understood as China making reference to the problems faced by many developing countries. This is because Beijing is attempting to position itself as their representative. The reference to the United Nations Charter, which is of fundamental importance to many post-colonial societies, is intended to create the impression that China is acting as a guardian of the present global order. The recent document is also an attempt to present the practical aspects of the Global Security Initiative to the Global South. According to Beijing's plans, the Initiative is supposed to form the basis for a new international architecture and to replace, in the future, the post-Cold War international order built by the United States and its allies. However, these plans require the support and participation of developing countries as a bloc.
- In its official reaction, the Ukrainian side has distanced itself from the proposals presented by the Chinese leadership. Moreover, President Zelensky has assumed an extremely cautious attitude to Ukraine's relations with China. It should be assumed that Ukraine may intend to draw China into peace talks, hoping that it may potentially mitigate Russia's hostile actions, and also that Ukraine will be able to convince China to decide against providing weapons to Russia. China's proposal was announced shortly before the emergency special session of the UN General Assembly held on the day preceding the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ukraine interpreted the proposal as an attempt to undermine the Ukrainian draft resolution condemning the Russian aggression. The UN delegates' massive support for this document (141 votes in favour) was of major importance to Ukraine, which viewed it as a demonstration of international support for the plan to resolve the conflict on Ukrainian conditions.
- Since the beginning of the invasion, the Ukrainian government has tried, to no avail, to convince China to step up its involvement in efforts to end the war. In spring 2022, Ukraine suggested that China act as one of the countries that were expected to provide

security guarantees to Ukraine in exchange for it abandoning its NATO membership aspirations. China did not respond to this offer. President Zelensky's team has repeatedly tried, again to no avail, to arrange a meeting between the Ukrainian leader and Xi Jinping and to influence the Chinese leadership by emphasising China's responsibility for global peace, which arises from its status as a global superpower and a member of the UN Security Council. Alongside this for several months now Kyiv has been developing and formalising its relations with Taiwan at the parliamentary level, which Beijing is opposed to. In August 2022, a cross-party parliamentary group was formed in the Ukrainian parliament "to foster friendship as well as trade and economic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation with Taiwan". The group is chaired by Oleksandr Merezhko. His criticism of the Chinese peace plan is intended to discourage Beijing from developing its cooperation with Russia and to prevent the creation of a platform for peace talks which would be moderated by a global power which *de facto* supports the Kremlin's aggressive policy.