

How is the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War Being Portrayed in China?

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Abstract: China has a complicated relationship with Russia who used to be Soviet Union. Recently, Xi Jinping has aligned closely with Putin. As Russia's friend, in the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war, does China support Russia, standing the opposite of the world? China's official attitude can be ambiguous, but what is the real attitude? What are mass people's attitudes in China? Therefore, this paper studies from the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the mass people's comments to figure out China's real attitude behind the word games.

Keywords: 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war, Sino-Russo relationship

1. Introduction

On February 21, 2022, Russia announced that it would recognize the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic as independent countries and established diplomatic relations on the 22nd. On February 24, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a "special military operation" against Ukraine in the name of demilitarization and denazification, declaring war on Ukraine. Missiles and airstrikes hit all of Ukraine, and Kyiv was rout. Countries around the world started sanctions against Russia and aid Ukraine. As a good neighbor of Russia, China's foreign ministry's attitude towards this war is indeed ambiguous. Analyzing China's attitude towards the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War from the perspectives of Chinese officials and Chinese mass people, this article will find out how this war is portrayed in China.

2. Attention on China

Russia's attack on Ukraine has brought the world's attention to China. Few days before the invasion, Putin met Xi Jinping in Beijing. As one of the five permanent members of the United Nations, China is obliged to express its opinion in this war, but China's ambiguity and neutrality have aroused great concern. There are three reasons why China officially remains neutral.

First, although Russia and China have complicated relations, they have been in a friendly status recently. As the first country to recognize the independence of the PRC, the Soviet Union supported China's initial economic and military development. Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in 1969 when China and the Soviet Union had military conflicts over Zhenbao Island in the Ussuri River and Xinjiang [1]. Since then, China started to engage in friendly diplomacy with the US and later jointly resist the Soviet's invasion of Afghanistan [1]. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Putin

coming to power, the diplomacy between China and Russia gradually returned to normal by signing the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation [1]. In 2010, the China-Russia national strategic partnership of coordination was established. After Trump took office, he began to crack down on China. China has basically lost the support of the Western world. If relations with Russia continue to deteriorate, China's foreign policy will be strongly questioned as a failure.

Second, the cooperation between China and Russia has a large amount of capital. In 2021, the trade volume of goods between China and Russia reached 146.87 billion USD [2]. As of 2021, China has been Russia's largest trading partner for 12 consecutive years [2]. China and Russia have close energy cooperation, operating major projects such as the China-Russia crude oil pipeline, the China-Russia eastern natural gas pipeline, Yamal LNG gas project, and Tianwan nuclear power plant units 1 to 4. If China's opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is too strong, funding for many projects in Sino-Russian cooperation will be lost.

Third, the issues with China and Taiwan have prevented China from being too opposed to Russian aggression. After Xi Jinping took office, the tension in China-Taiwan relations has been accelerated. His propaganda department has often stated that he wants to unify Taiwan into China through military force. If China opposes Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it will be difficult for Xi Jinping to put an end to his previous remarks, and it will also be difficult to provide the possibility of military unification of Taiwan in the future.

3. Officials Response

3.1. Minister of Foreign Affairs

Whether China supports or opposes Russia with the world, it is a difficult decision. Supporting Russia will make China sanctioned by the world, but opposing Russia will make China lose an important ally. Although China's minister of Foreign Affairs is neutral about the Russo-Ukrainian war, its statements at press conferences are thought-provoking.

First, the Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that China wants the Minsk Agreements to be implemented, respects sovereign integrity, and opposes unilateral sanctions [3,4]. When being asked by reporters whether China would join the rest of the world in sanctioning Russia, the group of Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons have repeatedly said that China calls on all parties to exercise restraint, resolve differences through negotiations, and avoid further escalation of the situation [5]. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not stopped cooperation projects with Russia [5]. It is worth noting that State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi believes that the security of one country cannot be at the expense of the security of other countries, and regional security cannot be guaranteed by strengthening or even expanding military blocs [6]. Under the circumstance of five consecutive rounds of NATO's eastward expansion, Russia's legitimate security demands should be taken seriously and properly addressed. When asked by reporters whether China thought Russia was an act of aggression, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying did not answer directly, instead emphasizing that the problem should be resolved through negotiation [7]. In a follow-up interview, Hua Chunying believes that Ukraine's passive negotiation was wrong and not conducive to peace [7]. However, with Russia already actively attacking Ukraine, the incident is no longer peaceful. What is more interesting is that when a reporter asks whether China would provide military support to Russia, Hua Chunying adds that Russia does not need China to provide military support after answering that China would not provide weapons voluntarily [13]. Also, China does not have any evacuation operations. The Chinese embassy in Ukraine requires Chinese citizens to carry the Chinese flag, which protects them from Russian attacks. However, the weapon does not have any personal feelings. Cannonballs don't stop bombing because of your nationality.

Through these answers, it is not difficult to find that the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs is cautiously maintaining neutrality and never answering questions directly. Nevertheless, through text analysis, we can see that China's attitude has the following five points. First, China will not stop trade cooperation with Russia. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not explicitly formed a group with Russia, but firmly opposes sanctions. Second, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a result of NATO's eastward expansion. Third, China believes that Ukraine needs to actively negotiate, even though it is Russia that invades Ukraine. Fourth, China doesn't supply Russia with weapons because Russia doesn't need it. Fifth, judging by China's response to Chinese citizens in Ukraine, China is confident that Russia will not attack them. This exactly demonstrates that Russia's action is well prepared and seems to pre-notified China, suggesting that the attack may be a conspiracy theory, and these Chinese are pawns in the game of powers.

3.2. China's Domestic Propaganda

Compared with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China's domestic propaganda's attitude is very sharp and obvious that China supports Russia. This part analyzes Chinese local media and Chinese propaganda on tightening the ideology.

First, the local Chinese news media vigorously promoted Putin's nationalist speeches [8]. People's Daily, CCTV News, Global News, and many other media reposted Putin's speech on the need to invade Ukraine, trying to arouse China's nationalist sentiment. These media empathize with the Chinese people, as China and Russia have had a glorious past. The Chinese media aroused the nationalism of some people in China, paving the way for the settlement of the Taiwan issue in the future.

Second, Chinese state media unconditionally forwards news from Russia, whether true or false. Public opinion warfare is an obvious feature of modern warfare. Both sides of the war will release true or false news to achieve their goals. Although the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not express its support for Russia, local media reposted news of Russia, which stated that the US has biological research institutes in Ukraine that are producing biological weapons to sanction Russia.

Third, on Weibo, as known as Chinese Twitter, the Chinese government control of public opinion, leaving only those who support Russia. It can be seen that under CCTV News, People's Daily, Sina News, and other Russian news released by various media and bloggers, the comments always support Putin and Russia. Interestingly, when the news hit the trending list on the day Russia started the "special military action" in Ukraine, the comments were love and peace, but a few minutes later, the comments suddenly became the support of Russia, hoping that Russia could hit Ukraine and intimidate Taiwan.

Therefore, the actions of the Chinese government confirm China's support for Russia, by stimulating nationalist sentiments and controlling freedom of speech to provide public opinion support for the subsequent resolution of the Taiwan issue [8]. Mainstream media in China blamed NATO for providing support to Ukraine as adding fuel to the fire, but they ignore the fact that Russia, as a big country, invaded Ukraine. China's local media is more inclined to support Russia, in the name of fighting for the nation and homeland security.

4. The Masses

4.1. Support of Russia

The CCP has successfully cultivated a group of nationalists. Those nationalists can empathize with Russia, thinking that both China and Russia were once big powers with many tributary states, but now they cannot even guarantee homeland security.

Many Chinese TikTok accounts posted videos comparing Russia and Ukraine to “divorced couples,” and the Russian invaders were forced to fight back [9]. The joke compares Russia and Ukraine to a “divorced couple,” saying that after the “divorce,” Crimea and “other children,” as well as many “family properties,” belonged to his “wife” Ukraine, and the “ex-husband” Russia also helped Ukraine pay off more than 200 billion debts. As a result, after the “divorce,” Other children “started a relationship” with NATO and besieged Russia. The Russian side was very angry, so they took back a “child,” Crimea. After that, Ukraine held a grudge, trying to “marry” the NATO family to run on Russia, while abusing the other two “children,” Luhansk and Donetsk. The US incited the flames. In the end, Russia could not bear to send troops to Ukraine.

Such remarks comparing the relationship between Russia and Ukraine to a divorced couple actually obliterate people's basic concept of justice and vilify the forces of justice in the west [10]. Moreover, it deliberately compares complex international relations with specific family relations, and compares aggression to family violence, creating the illusion that “clean officials are hard to break up with family affairs.”[10]. The CCP may pave the way for public opinion to invade Taiwan in the future.

In particular, the little pinks are frantically reporting any remarks that are sympathetic to Ukraine. They recognize anyone sympathizing with Ukraine is a loyal servant and spy of the US. Some people who have been brainwashed by public opinion have shown their personal cult of Putin, their respect for war, and even asked him to use nuclear war to teach NATO some lessons. For example, a little pink on Weibo said that the Russian army was so restrained that he was about to cry, and suggested going to a nuclear war [10]. There are also people claiming that they are willing to donate money to Russia, hoping that Putin can launch nuclear warheads at Britain, the US, and France as soon as possible, because they believe that if Russia falls, NATO will then deal with China and let Tsai Ing-wen take over China [10].

This is the role of party media propaganda, demonizing Ukraine and justifying the crimes of aggression. Through this type of brainwashing, the CCP can provide better public opinion support for future attacks on Taiwan. Whether the CCP will actually reunite Taiwan by force or not, it can at least intimidate Taiwan via its propaganda for Russia’s attack on Ukraine.

4.2. Support of Ukraine

Many people support Ukraine in China. However, their comments are wiped out by the CCP. On March 1, well-known Chinese dancer and host Jin Xing posted criticism of Putin and anti-war remarks on Weibo. She wrote that the scariest things in 2022 are: a Chinese woman with an iron chain around her neck said, “the world doesn't want me anymore;” and a crazy Russian man said, “if I don't continue to be president, I don't want this world.” Her post was also accompanied by a photo of a female anchor in blue and yellow clothes and explained that judging from the color of CCTV's sister's clothes, she supported Ukraine. Jin Xing advocated peace and stopped war. Then the post disappeared. She stated that she did not delete the post, but was blocked by the system. Sina, the company where Weibo works, published an article suggesting that Jin Xing’s career path may not be as smooth as before. Jin Xing's own TV show has not been broadcast for a long time.

Many articles that support Ukraine have also been banned by the system: “*Applause for the war is all idiots,*” “*Foresight of the Russian-Ukrainian War: The End of the War is the Grave of the Empire,*” “*Russian Fans, Please Control Your Stupidity,*” “*Stop Your Stupidity Cheers to Putin's war,*” “*Why Russia will lose this war,*” “*The ‘Fighting Nation’ Is a False Myth,*” “*It's Snowing in Ukraine: We Are on Ukraine's Side,*” “*Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Our Attitude,*” and even “*Open Letter of Over 2,000 Russian Scientists and Science Journalists Against War with Ukraine.*”[11]. These articles representing another voice once became “WeChat Populars” with 100,000+ views in one day.

However, before they could be heard by the world, they quickly disappeared into the mass grave of “404.”

4.3. Mellon-eating Masses

“Mellon-eating masses” refer to a group of people who are indifferent to these things. They are just to watch the fun, with an attitude that it has nothing to do with them. CCP's brainwashing propaganda won't make Ukrainian supporters change their minds, but it will make these onlookers who don't know the dangers of war mindless support because they like to watch the country go to war before. They even joke about Ukrainian women. They will leave messages to the government hoping to release Ukrainian visas to allow Ukrainian women to come to their homes. Videos promoting Ukrainian women are no longer available because the Chinese government has started cleaning up after they were seen by foreign media.

5. Conclusion

Although China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs cannot officially support Russia, it is not difficult to find that China has hinted that it supports Russia through the analysis of the spokesperson's speech and the propaganda policy of Chinese local media. In the management of public remarks, comments that support Russia and war can appear in various places, and even those who ridicule the war can be published, while those remarks that pursue peace cannot be seen.

Apparently, China's purpose is to intimidate Taiwan, and even prepare for Taiwan's return to China by military force. China's approach is obviously lacking consideration. Too much propaganda about the need for war can drive the nation into an overly nationalistic mood. The 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war is not just a war in China, but also a public opinion tool to consolidate and support the legitimization of the CCP. It is portrayed as a fight for national revival and national dignity. China believes this war is necessary because NATO violates Russia's security which is ignored by the world, just like the Taiwan issue. Nevertheless, rather than intimidating Taiwan, China should consider the problem of propaganda for the war: if Russia loses, how will the CCP solve the rising nationalism and the distorted ideology of war?

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