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Sergio Rodriguez Gelfenstein
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And what does China think of the conflict in Ukraine?

In the case of its relationship with the Soviet Union first and then with Russia, China has moved from alliance to ideological confrontation and from there to "pragmatic coexistence".



The escalation in the confrontation of the United States against China had its starting point during the administration of President George W. Bush, but now, almost 20 years later, it found the Asian country in a situation of political and economic stability that allows it to face a reality that was not foreseen. Although it is hard to believe, until 2019, China still thought it was possible to build its economic model and society without strategic clashes of any kind. That is why he always avoided confrontational rhetoric, permanently asserting that he did not aspire to global hegemony or to be a threat to any other country.

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The philosophy of its foreign policy is based on cooperation, multilateralism and the practice of win-win, avoiding the zero-sum doctrine of bipolar systems.

In March 2018, the United States began an unprecedented level of conflict that became known generically as "trade war" but that reached other areas: academic, military, technological, scientific, communicational and others that had remained quite outside the axis of disagreements.



An unidentified official, left, escorts Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev second on the left, Russian President Vladimir Putin second on the right, and China's President Xi Jinping on the right. (Alexei Druzhinin/RIA Novosti, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP)

But what seems to have surpassed China's infinite patience is the positioning of the United States in its internal affairs such as the human rights situation in Xinjiang and Tibet and above all the direct interference in the promotion of the violent actions of protesters in Hong Kong in 2019 that surpassed any level of Chinese acceptance of its willingness to establish international relations in a framework of harmony and balance.

All this caused China to wake up from its "golden dream" in which it considered the United States a friendly country, at least in its public rhetoric. In this context, without falling into provocation, sustaining its discourse of non-aggression and peaceful coexistence, it has been forced to take decisions in order to take decisions in order to assume its sovereignty, its territorial integrity and in defense of its development plans and projects.

This is the context that allows us to know and understand the arguments that support the decisions that China has taken and the actions that China has carried out both international and domestic policy within the framework of Russia's military operation in Ukraine.

A few days before the start of Russia's war response to NATO's eastward expansion, President Vladimir Putin visited Beijing. It remains in the realm of speculation whether Putin informed President Xi about the decision he had perhaps already made at that time regarding the potential installation of the response to the actions of the Atlantic alliance in the vicinity of Russia's western borders. However, at the meeting – according to the subsequent report of the Russian presidency – a wide range of issues related to practical cooperation in the commercial and economic, energy, financial and investment, scientific-technical and humanitarian fields were agreed.

The "important stabilizing role" of both nations in the current international environment, aimed at facilitating the democratization and inclusiveness of interstate relations, was highlighted. Likewise, special attention was paid to energy cooperation between both nations.

The Joint Declaration signed after the visit laid down the principles and norms with which they intend to overcome the current chaos and organize the New World Order. The parties called on all countries of the world "to seek well-being for all and, to this end, to build dialogue and mutual trust, [...] uphold universal human values such as peace, development, equality, justice, democracy and freedom, respect the right of peoples to independently determine the development paths of their countries [...], seek a genuine multipolarity in which the United Nations and its Security Council play a central and coordinating role, promote more democratic international relations and ensure peace, stability and sustainable development throughout the world." All this happened before the Russian special operation in Ukraine.



Just a few days later, on February 8, China's diplomatic mission to the European Union said in a statement that the expansion of the Atlantic bloc is not "conducive to global security and stability," thereby criticizing NATO's expansionary eastward policy, adding in the document that "NATO is a remnant of the Cold War and the world's largest military alliance." which continues to grow and expand its shares thirty years after the fall of the Soviet Union. With this, not only tacitly, but explicitly exposed a coincidence in the analysis of China and Russia about the aggressive expansionist policy of NATO.

This approach is very interesting in light of what had been the traditional analysis in China, which marked – and in some ways continues to make – a structural difference in the West's treatment of China and Russia. In a paper published in January of this year by Stanford University Ph.D. Yu Bin, a senior researcher at the Shanghai Institute of American Studies, for a publication by the Eurasian Society of Systems Sciences, the author argued that there is a "clear difference in temperature" in U.S. relations with China and Russia. asserting that since the end of the Soviet Union, the United States has never given up on attracting Russia while pointing to the "stagnation, regression, reversal and deterioration" of Sino-American relations. According to Dr. Yu, this "asymmetry" in U.S. policy toward China and Russia cannot be explained solely by structural factors such as strength and geography. He opines that "the collective consciousness of American society at the cognitive, cultural, and even civilized/racial levels is determined by mainstream decision-making."

Regarding the situation created in Ukraine, the Chinese professor believes that in recent years, the United States has frequently defined China and Russia as strategic competitors, although the American establishment, especially the realists, have never given up fighting

for the return of Russia. Despite the crisis in Ukraine, it seems to be leading to a change in that perception based on the realization that the United States has no capacity for a "two-front war" in the triangular game between China, the United States and Russia.

Therefore, China should take preventive measures in order to deal in the long term with a likely continued deterioration of relations with the United States, thereby facilitating a greater understanding of the direction and strength of the trilateral interaction between China, the United States and Russia. Seen another way, China has perceived nato's aggression against Russia as only a first step towards attacking Beijing, which is the real strategic objective of the United States and NATO. Yu considers the underlying problem to be that: "A ghost haunts the West: the ghost of a Sino-Russian alliance, real or imagined."

However, China has tried to be prudent, observe and prepare for what might come, especially since certain sectors of Western public opinion are trying to draw a parallel between Ukraine's situation with Russia and Taiwan's with China.

In a subsequent article published in the journal "Russia in Global Affairs" in early April, Dr. Yu himself argues for China's "fairly sincere" neutrality in the current conflict because both Russia and Ukraine are China's "strategic partners," which is clearly just a half-truth. This time, Yu surmised that the ongoing military operation in Ukraine "seriously undermines Beijing's interests, including its extensive foreign investment program under the Belt and Road Initiative, for which Ukraine has been an important regional center."

According to Yu, this position is not strictly commercial but also obeys philosophical principles of "humanism, pragmatism and political realism" as many are concerned that the current rhetoric of escalation towards the conflict in Ukraine could lead to a greater war. In this context, China is concerned about "ensuring balanced and lasting security for all parties", which is why it follows historical principles of its independent foreign policy that stem from its refusal to form military alliances. In the case of its relationship with the Soviet Union first and then with Russia, China has moved from alliance to ideological confrontation and from there to "pragmatic coexistence". That is, today there is an alliance because it suits both but misgivings, doubts and distrust remain. More than more, Russia is a Western country and China is not.

For this reason, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has made an effort to remain distant and independent of the conflict in Ukraine, marking a clear distance from the actions of

Washington and Brussels that have assumed positions in favor of encouraging conflict and war. This decision has been maintained despite the veiled and not so veiled threats that both the United States and Europe have uttered against China.

China's role in the conflict has been linked to upholding an independent foreign policy of peace, having its own opinion on the matter and making a great effort in its own way to play a constructive role in alleviating the situation, promoting peace talks and preventing humanitarian crises. According to China's government, "the mentality of the Cold War and pitched confrontation must be resisted. China and many countries, including developing countries, have the same position on this issue."

Likewise, Beijing has always opposed unilateral sanctions on the grounds that the most important thing is not who wants to help Russia circumvent sanctions, but why normal trade and cooperation between countries, including China and Russia, have been unnecessarily damaged. Similarly, they believe that the question is why are there countries that try to use sanctions to intensify conflicts and divide the world? In this regard, China believes that assuming a sickly anti-Russian attitude does not help to solve the problem, but that it should be hoped that the parties will approach, talk and agree on the cessation of hostilities and the end of the dispute, instead of increasing sanctions and intensifying conflicts.

Sergio Rodríguez Gelfenstein for La Pluma, May 5, 2022

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