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On The Ukraine Crisis: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific

The Ukraine Crisis: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific
Building a Coalition to Deter War

Dan Blumenthal

Senior Fellow and Director of Asian Studies
American Enterprise Institute

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Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to speak here today. Congressional interest in how Russia's attack on Ukraine reverberates in the Indo-Pacific is crucial. Our allies always ask if our Asia policy is bipartisan, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) is always looking to amplify any political divisions apparent in democracies.

The Russian invasion is the most disruptive event to the post–World War II world order in our time. We are in a new era of geopolitics, and we need new strategic approaches to ensure that future coalitions needed to deter and defeat great-power aggression are strong and credible. History teaches that great-power aggression is like a contagion, difficult to stop once it begins to spread. We must contain it.

We can see more danger ahead. Vladimir Putin is not alone in his desire to bring down the order that has kept great-power peace. General Secretary of the Communist Party Xi Jinping has been articulating his vision of a new international relations with China at the center and calculated that backing Putin's war of aggression would further his geopolitical interests. Xi certainly believed that Putin would succeed and is surprised by the fierce resistance of the Ukrainian people, the courageous leadership of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the unified Western response. He has other reasons to be satisfied. Deterrence in Europe and countries crucial to the coalition against Xi's aggressive designs have stayed on the sidelines of this conflict.

Let me highlight three lessons.

1. The February 4 Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development was an extraordinary validation of Xi's main diplomatic themes since he ascended to the top of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012.

Xi has endeavored to replace the US system of alliances with a network of "partnerships" beholden to Beijing. However, in order to build a new order, you must tear down the old one. The February 4th joint document is a searing critique of the United States and the order it leads. It is a justification for the use of force by Russia and the potential use of force by China. The PRC puts the onus for violence and destruction in Europe squarely on Washington's shoulders.

Here are some highlights of the joint statement's justifications for Russian aggression and pretext for China's more aggressive moves to undermine US alliances in Asia:

*"No State can or should ensure its own security separately from the security of the rest of the world and at the expense of the security of other States."*¹ **This is a critique of NATO expansion and US alliances in Asia.**

*“Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions, intend to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext, oppose colour revolutions, and will increase cooperation in the aforementioned areas.”*² **This is likewise a critique of alliances and US support for human rights and liberty.**

*“The sides oppose further enlargement of NATO and call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon its ideologized cold war approaches. . . . The sides stand against the formation of closed bloc structures and opposing camps in the Asia-Pacific region and remain highly vigilant about the negative impact of the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy on peace and stability in the region.”*³ **This is a call for an end to a “Cold War” approach, meaning the alliance system, and opposition to the US Indo-Pacific strategy.**

*“The sides are seriously concerned about the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom (AUKUS), which provides for deeper cooperation between its members in areas involving strategic stability, in particular their decision to initiate cooperation in the field of nuclear-powered submarines. Russia and China believe that such actions are contrary to the objectives of security and sustainable development of the Asia-Pacific region, increase the danger of an arms race in the region, and pose serious risks of nuclear proliferation.”*⁴ **This is specific, joint Russian-Chinese opposition to the Biden administration’s new Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) initiative, targeting supposed nonproliferation violations. This opposition could resonate with countries outside the West.**

The document also criticizes the United States for its supposedly unjustified abandonment or abrogation of treaty obligations, from the Biological Weapons Convention (in reality, the international community should be examining whether China is in compliance with this convention) to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and blames it for the breakdown in global nonproliferation efforts. China and Russia are making the case that the US is an arrogant rule breaker. These themes resonate in many parts of the world, including inside of China.

And this is the kicker for China:

*“The Russian side reaffirms its support for the One-China principle, confirms that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China, and opposes any forms of independence of Taiwan.”*⁵ **No doubt Xi got promises from Putin of support should he attack Taiwan.**

Notably, Japan was also singled out in the joint statement as a unique “environmental polluter,” even before the extent of its cooperation with NATO was known. Tokyo had previously been trying to negotiate an entente with Russia to free up resources for its rivalry with China.

Russian aggression against Ukraine has taught us that we *must* take seriously what leaders such as Putin and Xi say, particularly when they speak in their own languages. This document was a pretext for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and for China’s diplomatic campaign to support it. Russia and China are dedicated to destroying US allied structures, by force if necessary. None of

the themes and grievances are new, but post-invasion they take on a new urgency.

What is novel is the dramatic meeting of the two authoritarian powers, the invasion soon after, and China's pro-Russian stance. Since the invasion, Beijing has been pressing its case internationally, warning that the US Indo-Pacific strategy will:

Provoke trouble, put together closed and exclusive small circles or groups, and get the region off course toward fragmentation and bloc-based division. [It] is as dangerous as the NATO strategy of eastward expansion in Europe. . . . If allowed to go on unchecked, it would bring unimaginable consequences and ultimately push the Asia-Pacific over the edge of an abyss.⁶

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi wrote an article in the *People's Daily* on April 24th titled "Implementing Global Security Initiative to Safeguard World Peace and Tranquility," reiterating that the "Cold War mentality" of engaging in "exclusive small circles" undermines global security. This amplifies General Secretary Xi Jinping's proposed Global Security Initiative, which accepted the Russian-espoused concept of "indivisible security." What Xi and Putin mean is that US alliances come at their expense and will be opposed.⁷

Statements by high-level Chinese diplomats should not be dismissed as mere propaganda. They are clear warnings to Washington to abandon its Indo-Pacific strategy. China reserves the option to resist forcefully. In this view, Russia's case for attacking Ukraine sets a useful precedent.

Further, small countries such as Ukraine have been warned by Beijing to stay away from the United States's machinations. In Beijing's telling, sympathy is warranted for Ukrainians because they were used as pawns in Washington's bid to maintain geopolitical dominance. These messages will resonate with smaller countries, whose inclinations are to stay neutral in international politics.

2. The West (including key Asian allies) is unified; the rest stayed neutral. We have to work hard to avoid neutrality in Asia.

Australia, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan have been steadfast in applying sanctions and supporting Ukraine. The Philippines and Indonesia voted to condemn Russia, but India and Vietnam did not. Most Southeast Asian countries have been at best lukewarm in their support for NATO, Ukraine, and the US. Countries critical to Indo-Pacific energy needs, such as Saudi Arabia, have also not been supportive of allied efforts against Russia. Neutrality and fence-sitting are a growing problem in international affairs and undermine US attempts to build anti-hegemonic strategies. The West is coalescing around the idea that there is a new cold war, but most of the world does not see things this way.

Of course, Asian countries view China as more threatening than Russia, but absent a comprehensive US-led diplomatic campaign, we cannot count on their support in a Taiwan crisis. Many likely think they can sit on the sidelines if China attacks the democratic island. The PRC has been working for decades to give countries reasons to stay neutral. Beijing's campaign to wipe out Taiwan's international personality is particularly dangerous. Should it begin a

conflict, it will point to Taiwan's diplomatic isolation as evidence that Taiwan is merely a province that China is bringing back into the fold. We have developed no international legal or diplomatic answer around which our partners can coalesce. In contrast, Russia's invasion of a sovereign state mobilized a Western response.

China also has strong economic ties to every country that the US would need in a coalition to defend Taiwan, and Beijing regularly uses coercive military power to intimidate them.

China does not need allies, just fence-sitters. Countries do not need to agree with all of China's statements on Taiwan and on US allies, they just need to justify their neutrality.

In turn, we need active diplomatic efforts that disabuse our partners of the notion that countries can remain neutral should China start a war. Our diplomacy with potential "partners in deterrence" should emphasize that it is the PRC that is abrogating its commitments to peace, which were the prerequisite for our downgrading of relations with Taiwan. Beijing is threatening the peace and stability that we are obligated to defend in the Taiwan Relations Act. We need to persuade partners, such as the Philippines, that the risks of stepped-up cooperative defense measures pale in comparison to war in the Taiwan Strait.

In this respect, two administrations have done well in institutionalizing the "Quad," but the organization is still too shy about making clear deterrent statements—clear statements of opposition to the use of force and defense commitments backed by credible defense capabilities.

There are other reasons for the potential neutrality of our partners, and we carry some of the blame. For example, we must retire the notion that we can pivot away from any of the countries or regions that matter for our rivalry with China and Russia. We have allowed Moscow and Beijing too much influence in key regions such as the Persian Gulf. Arguably, Russia was emboldened by our constant identification of China as our only "pacing" threat, with the implication that we would diminish our influence in Europe.

Both the absence of a trade vision for Southeast Asia and a sclerotic security assistance system hurt efforts to build a deterrent coalition. *But we have seen how fast military aid supplementals can pass and how much faster the right weapons systems can get into the right hands in a crisis. In Asia and the Taiwan Strait in particular, we should act like a crisis is upon us and get whatever we can to our partners fast, from replacement fighter aircraft to Taiwan to more coast guard cutters to the Philippines.*

Our partners have also gotten too used to neutrality as a default mode. We do not need countries to provoke China publicly, but they should make these commitments to us privately.

3. There are lessons from the failed efforts at deterrence in Ukraine.

While we admire the courage of Ukrainian fighters and the leadership of Zelenskyy, let's be clear: Deterrence of war in Ukraine failed.

We had no military commitment to Ukraine and said so repeatedly, and we took military options

off the table unilaterally. We gave escalation dominance to Russia by consistently conveying our desire to avoid escalation.

While declassifying intelligence was innovative and helped the West unify after the invasion, it did not deter war. We have armed Ukraine asymmetrically, with weapons that can destroy larger weapon systems. That has had success in punishing Russian forces, but it did not prevent Putin from going to war.

A similar approach will not work to deter the PRC either, but it is the direction we are headed on Taiwan. We make no military commitment to the island and are unwisely moving to a more directive policy that demands Taiwan only buy what we define as “asymmetric capabilities.” This approach only addresses one kind of threat to Taiwan. But Taiwan faces coercion and gray-zone threats every day.

Instead, we should shape Taiwan military so that we can work together as coalition partners to resist a range of coercive threats. But this requires careful alliance management, the kind we practice with other potential coalition partners. Absent discussion of roles and missions and the development of common warfighting strategies and threat perceptions, any attempt to dictate what type of weapons Taiwan should buy will cause open divisions between our two nations. That only benefits Beijing.

Moreover, in the wake of Putin’s nuclear threats, we should take Beijing’s escalatory options more seriously.

Finally, key to deterrence is ensuring that we have escalation dominance economically. We are vulnerable to targeted Chinese economic coercion, as we rely on supply chains that run through China for critical items, such as chemicals in pharmaceuticals and other active pharmaceutical ingredients.

China is vulnerable to economic coercion as well; it relies on global markets for everything from technology and energy to food and agriculture, key metals, minerals, and capital. Indeed, Chinese dependence on the global economy has given it pause in helping Russia evade sanctions. We should maintain strong ties with all of China’s key suppliers.

In sum, Xi is using Putin’s war to press his case for a “New Era” that does away with the US allied system. Putin has taught us that unanswered rhetorical threats can lead to devastation. We must answer Xi by highlighting Beijing’s constant threats to peace and security in Asia and its role as the partner to the country killing thousands of innocent people. We need to persuade countries to get off the fence and stand united in declaring opposition to Chinese use of force, pursue targeted decoupling, and plan now with our friends and partners to exploit Chinese vulnerabilities in case of a crisis. These are hard things to do, but they are worth it to avoid a war like what we’re seeing in Europe.

¹ People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation, “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” February 4, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

² People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation, “Joint Statement.”

³ People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation, “Joint Statement.”

⁴ People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation, “Joint Statement.”

⁵ People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation, “Joint Statement.”

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Cherish Peace, Work Together in Unity, and Pursue a Win-Win Future for the Asia-Pacific—Address by Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng at the Fourth International Forum on Security and Strategy,” March 19, 2022,

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202203/t20220319_10653460.html.

⁷ Wang Yi, “luò shí quán qiú ān quán chàng yì , shǒu hù shì jiè hé píng ān níng” [Implementing Global Security Initiative to Safeguard World Peace and Tranquility], April, 24, 2022, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-04/24/nw.D110000renmrb_20220424_1-06.htm.