

## Was China duped on Ukraine?

**Beijing is now in damage control mode**

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Western intelligence reportedly knew that China asked Russia in early February not to invade until after the Beijing Winter Olympics.

We will never know what exactly Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping talked about when they met just before the opening of The Games. But some things can be inferred from the chronology of events and China's actions.

On Feb. 4, Putin and Xi issued a Joint Statement that described the friendship between Russia and China as having "[no limits](#)" and not being "affected by the changing international environment and circumstantial changes in third countries."

That last phrase has an ominous ring in the light of subsequent events.

Two days after the Olympics closed on Feb. 22, Putin recognized the separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas region of Ukraine and sent in "peace-keepers." On Feb. 24, he invaded Ukraine.

Waiting until after the Olympics betrayed some measure of coordination.

But on Feb. 19, in Munich, Foreign Minister Wang Yi had said that the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries should be respected and safeguarded as "a basic norm of international relations" and that this was "the consistent, principled position of China" adding "and that applies equally to Ukraine."

Did he lie?

Good diplomats seldom tell outright lies, particularly lies that will be exposed within a few days by events. Wang Yi is a skillful diplomat. Russia's invasion of Ukraine left him and other Chinese diplomats with a great deal of egg dripping from their faces.

China is neuralgic about external support for "separationists" in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Chinese diplomats have contorted themselves into awkward and uncomfortable postures, trying to simultaneously defend the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity and Russia's gross violation of these principles in Ukraine.

I doubt that Putin lied to Xi. All I said about diplomacy and lying applies even more strongly to summit-level diplomacy. Trust between leaders once lost is difficult to restore.

But precisely for that reason, leaders often speak obliquely to give themselves wriggle room. And while leaders, like their diplomats, do not often tell outright lies, neither are they obliged to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Xi could have been led to believe that Russia's "special military operation" would be a limited gray zone operation as it was in the Donbas between 2014 to 2022. Or Putin may have

persuaded Xi that Russia would win quickly as it did in Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014. In both those cases, the international response was minimal.

Some element of wishful thinking or selective hearing may have been at play. Putin himself may have believed that this would be a quick victory with no serious consequences.

China initially did not try to evacuate its citizens from Ukraine. The safety of Chinese citizens abroad is a sensitive domestic issue. On the day Russia attacked, the Chinese embassy in Kyiv advised Chinese citizens to stay home and display the Chinese flag, presumably because it thought this would keep them safe because of China's close relationship with Russia. But the next day, the embassy told the Chinese not to reveal their nationality.

As the scale of the Russian invasion became clear, and with growing international condemnation of a war that was not going as easily as anticipated, China began to shift position.

On Feb. 25, Xi urged Putin to resolve issues with Ukraine through negotiations.

On Mar. 1, Wang Yi spoke to the Ukrainian Foreign Minister and said China was "extremely concerned about the damage to civilians" and again called for "a solution through negotiations."

For the first time, China used the term "war", but still did not call it an invasion or criticize Russia.

These adjustments of position do not suggest detailed foreknowledge of Russia's plans. Even if it was aware of Moscow's intention to invade Ukraine, Beijing was probably caught off-guard by the scale and ferocity of the Russian offensive and the international response. China is now in damage control mode.

China is not in a good place.

Superficial analysts simplistically believe that with the West preoccupied with Ukraine, China will enjoy a free hand as it did during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. But this time, it is China's partner Russia that has gone to war, not its rival, America.

Putin has reinvigorated the idea of "The West" and done what American presidents have failed to do: get Europe to take defense seriously. Overnight, Germany doubled its defense budget. A more resolute West has implications for Taiwan too.

Unless Moscow withdraws, or Beijing criticizes Russian aggression, China will be tainted by association, fueling the anxieties many countries already feel about Chinese behavior and complicating relations with the U.S. and Europe.

China's economy is slowing. Beijing must be seriously troubled by the uncertainties for the global economy arising from the war in the heart of Europe. The scope of sanctions is unprecedented. With even neutral Switzerland joining, Russia can only turn to China. Beijing may not want to throw good money after bad, but with its own people still cheering Russia, it has few choices.

Putin miscalculated and China blindly followed Russia into a strategic dead-end with no easy exit. Beijing and Moscow are stuck with each other because neither has any other partner of significant strategic weight. Growing Russian dependence on China may prove as much a liability as an asset for Beijing.

