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*Opinion*

## Ukraine invasion: China may be world's best bet for brokering peace between Russia and the West



- The threat of nuclear force calls for greater attempts at negotiation and a willingness by the West to make concessions to provide Putin with a way out
- Beijing's relations with Moscow, plus its core principles of non-interference and 'no first use' of nukes make it an ideal mediator

**Tom Plate**

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

In global diplomatic circles, what is not uttered publicly can reveal more than that which is out in the open. Perhaps no one captured this with more spice and sauce than Charles Maurice De Talleyrand-Périgord, the acknowledged French maestro of European diplomacy from the second half of the 18th century into the 19th. As he memorably proclaimed, "speech was given to man to conceal his thoughts".

Speech concealment is thus hardly unknown in current diplomacy but for the Chinese diplomat, having to carry the burden of an alliance of some sort with Russia at a time of the latter's gruesome humanitarian criminality in Ukraine must be hard on the nerves.

From China's perspective, the problem is that any invasion, even by a presumed ally, is a blatant rejection of its axiom of non-interference in the internal affairs of another sovereign state. As foreign minister Wang Yi [puts it](#), ever so mildly, "the current situation is not what we want to see".

Keep in mind that the Moscow-Beijing relationship is not exactly blood brothers under the skin. Russia has not always been such a good neighbour. At a length of more than 4,000km, the border between them is the world's sixth longest – about the distance between Washington and Los Angeles.

Over the past two centuries, China has had to cede more territory to a bullying Russia than to anyone else. The fact is that the "new" [relationship](#) with Moscow got strung out on a limb of an imaginary Sino-Russian romance.

Yes, President Vladimir Putin pulled off a minor diplomatic coup. But the Beijing-Moscow love-in was forced. Even when Russia was fraternally Communist, Beijing was hardly unable to turn its back on Moscow, as Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger discovered to their satisfaction [50 years ago](#). Let's hope China does again.

The publicly articulated non-interference in another's internal affairs is a red line. In some respects, leaving aside evil humanitarian crises, it is not so bad an operating principle, and, though not always observed in saintly fashion, remains prominent in Chinese Communist thought.

Another principle – easily defensible – is China's stated policy of never using nuclear weapons except in retaliation for a first-strike nuclear attack. If all nations adhered to this sensible norm of no-first use, nuclear war, at least from the point of view of pure logic, would be a non-starter: no one could go first. Alas, all nations do not honour the Chinese norm. One that doesn't is the US.

Regarding Ukraine, the US position is to dispatch arms against the invading Russians but [no armed troops](#); to send jets but no pilots to fly them.

Recently, I informally polled a group of more than two dozen distinguished international professionals and asked whether there was any valid justification for Nato/US military intervention – whether creating a no-fly zone over Ukraine or getting down and dirty with actual boots on the ground.

No one said they wanted to go there – and this is the Western consensus view. And so, the Russian-initiated war is slated to last weeks, if not months or more, assuming Ukraine resistance remains, and Putin leaves the key to his nuclear Pandora's Box in his back pocket.

But suppose instead that the enemy's continuing defiance – and the region's eventual warming that will melt hard surfaces into tank-immobilising mud – pushes a frustrated and nervous Putin to reach into his back pocket to operationalise tactical nukes. Even an initial modest run up the first steps of the nuclear ladder would cross the international humanitarian line into uncharted zones.

The infamous 1945 Hiroshima atomic bomb, by today's nuclear metrics, would be rated merely "tactical". It destroyed only one city. Today's thermonuclear monstrosities could dramatically redefine global warming and potentially pulverise much of our planet.

The road to nuclear doomsday must be blocked. Western diplomatic thinking must expand, not tighten up, configuring a smart way to offer Putin, sane or not, a corridor to serious negotiation and peaceful settlement. To that end, all anti-war, peace-loving citizens of our imperilled planet might wish to associate themselves with the bold but sensible recent Pugwash [Declaration](#) on Ukraine.

This pioneering track-two, historically anti-war organisation, with offices in Europe as well as Washington, has brought forth an eight-point plan of de-escalation which strikes me as the height of sanity.

Here are some elements in the statement issued two weeks ago: an immediate ceasefire; withdrawal from the present territory of Ukraine of all foreign military forces; recognition of autonomy for the Donbas region inside Ukraine and of Crimea as part of the Russian Federation; in due course, elimination of sanctions against Russia; clear agreement on the [neutral status](#) of Ukraine (Ukraine will not seek Nato membership); and, treaty-based international security assurances for neutral Ukraine and its economic rehabilitation.

We need to think ahead if we're not to fall behind evolving events and slide into even wider, deeper war. The West is not negotiating from weakness but, due to its commendable solidarity, from strength. It should drop the provocative Nato option for Ukraine if abandoning it provides the off-ramp that Putin requires to stop burying Ukrainian cities. Wise compromise is not cowardly.

The Xi Jinping government should aim to broker a deal consistent with its core principles and reveal China as a pro-peace prime-time international player. Beijing is not the only one that can mediate but, at this moment, it may be the best possible mediator the world has.

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