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Highlights

- The 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics have been instrumental in China's efforts to improve the country's international image and prestige, but more importantly, Xi Jinping's political power and elation in anticipation of the Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).
- The uncertainty of Beijing's position over the Russia-Ukraine war and the effort to present itself as a neutral observer is becoming an increasing challenge. Growing pressure from the West has led to Beijing's diplomatic activism calling for an end to the war in Ukraine as soon as possible.
- The "Two Sessions" in China that took place on 5–11 March and the 2022 Government Work Report show Beijing's strong efforts to sustain economic growth and reassure international investors.



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- China has been facing a serious COVID outbreak in the country since the beginning of the year. Xi Jinping's determination to pursue a strict COVID policy could have serious economic consequences not only for the country but also globally.
- Compared to Russia's military action in Crimea in 2014, the response from the Southeast Asian region and Taiwan to the Russian invasion of Ukraine was tougher and more united, but most countries were reluctant to directly condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine and took a neutral stance.

Foreign policy

Beijing Winter Olympics.

While the significance of the Beijing Winter Olympics for China's international prestige and image is unquestionable, the main goals and benefits of the Games are related to domestic policy. The Chinese media paid close attention to the Beijing Winter Olympics, with nationalist sentiment and pompous rhetoric being felt in describing and broadcasting the events, aiming to impress the Chinese on China's successes and achievements, as well as showing tangible progress in implementing the Chinese Dream of Xi Jinping. Meeting with Chinese journalists shortly before the start of the Olympic Games, Xi emphasised the importance of Chinese journalists' work and called for "telling China's story well to the world"¹. Given the politically important and sensitive year for Beijing, the Games will allow Xi Jinping to strengthen his political power and at the same time weaken the increasingly loud opposing voices within the Chinese Communist Party.

In 2022, Beijing becomes the first city in the world to host both the Summer and Winter Olympics. While the Chinese society was in high spirits in anticipation of the Games, the Chinese Communist Party had to deal with a variety of challenges and tensions: escalating outside criticism, a deepening confrontation with the West, a partial diplomatic boycott of the Games, the fight against geopolitical tensions and the ongoing COVID pandemic.

Compared to the list of foreign guests at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, there is a significant dif-

ference in the 2022 Games, with far fewer representatives from democracies, and the majority of foreign delegations from authoritarian or hybrid regimes. Before the start of the Games, some Western countries (USA, Australia, UK, Canada, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark) have voiced an official diplomatic boycott of the Games over the deteriorating human rights situation in China.

Foreign leaders at the 2022 Beijing winter olympic

russia	Mongolia	Saudi Arabia
Poland	Pakistan	Bosnia and Herzegovina
Serbia	Argentina	Thailand
Luxembourg	Qatar	Papua New Guinea
Monaco	United Arab Emirates	South Korea
Cambodia	Egypt	Ecuador
Singapore	Kazakhstan	Turkmenistan
Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan

War in Ukraine, Sino-Russian relations.

On the eve of the Beijing Winter Olympics, the official visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Beijing, during which he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping, was probably the focus of world media's attention. The joint statement issued after the meeting, "International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development", has raised suspicions that it may symbolise China's indirect acceptance of and support for Russia's military action in

Ukraine, which began immediately after the Beijing Olympics. The statement highlighted bilateral relations and their importance: "The new inter-State relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era. Friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no "forbidden" areas of cooperation, strengthening of bilateral strategic cooperation is neither aimed against third countries nor affected by the changing international environment and circumstantial changes in third countries."² The statement extended hints of a golden age in Sino-Russian relations made at the end of 2021: on December 2, Wang Wenbin, a spokesman for China's foreign ministry, described China and Russia as "more than allies"³.

Russia's military action in Ukraine, which at once was met with great difficulties, has put China in an awkward position. It has led to China's decision to take a neutral position publicly and to strike a balance between Russia and Ukraine, which are important strategic partners for China (China signed a strategic partnership declaration with Ukraine in 2011, but actual cooperation has been limited). At a press conference of China's foreign ministry on 25 February, Wang Wenbin presented Beijing's official position for the first time: he refrained from condemning Russia's actions. Until now, the unchanging narrative that there is a "complex and special historical context of the Ukraine issue" has prevailed, partly trying to justify Russia's actions by emphasising that "China understands Russia's legitimate security concerns"⁴.

China did not expect the Russian military operation in Ukraine to face major difficulties and stall. China's initial belief in Russia's success is evidenced by the extremely slow response of the Chinese embassy in Ukraine to the events and the delay in warning and evacuating the country's citizens in Ukraine. This situation has received a particularly negative reaction in Chinese society⁵.

The harsh reaction of the West and the unity shown have forced China to soften its rhetoric on relations with Russia. On 28 February, in response to a question on the Sino-Russian part-

nership, a representative of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasised that "China and Russia are strategic partners but not allies" and added that "China will not interfere in the affairs of third countries"⁶. Compared to previous statements, this time the description of bilateral relations was more moderate.

As Russian troops become stuck in Ukraine and international isolation grows, China's diplomatic activity has increased significantly, in part due to deepening domestic problems, particularly the outbreak of a new wave of COVID-19. The volatile international situation does not allow Beijing to focus on domestic issues. China has recently been actively involved in diplomatic dialogue:

- On 8th March, Xi Jinping spoke to the leaders of France and Germany, focusing on Ukraine. Important detail: during the conversation, Xi described the situation in Ukraine as a war ("War fire broke out in Europe again"⁷);
- On March 14, senior Chinese diplomat Yang Jiechi met with US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in Rome to discuss the situation in Ukraine⁸;
- On March 18, the presidents of China and the United States held a virtual meeting during which the situation in Ukraine was also discussed⁹;
- Andriy Yermak, the representative of the President of Ukraine, announced on March 22 that the President of Ukraine intends to speak with the Chinese leader in the near future¹⁰;
- On March 25, the Chinese president spoke by telephone with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. The situation in Ukraine was discussed during the conversation.

At the United Nations (UN), China is also seeking to position itself as a neutral state. At a meeting of the UN Security Council on 25 February, China, along with India and the UAE, abstained from voting on a resolution¹¹ condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine. The resolution was not adopted due to Russia's veto. A UN General Assembly (GA) resolution calling on Russia to suspend operations in Ukraine was adopted with the support of 141 countries, but China, along with 35 other countries, abstained.¹² On 24

March, the UN GA adopted another resolution on the humanitarian consequences and aggression against Ukraine. The distribution of votes was similar to that in the previous GA resolution: China, along with 37 other countries, abstained¹³.

Domestic policy trends

“Two sessions”

Parallel sessions of the Chinese National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference took place on 5–11 March; the event is also called the “Two Sessions” in China. The main goal of the Congress, which takes place once a year, is to approve the 2022 Government Work Report, which will be presented at the end of the Congress by a representative of the State Council (Chinese Prime Minister). This Government Report is the most important policy document this year, setting out broad economic goals and annual plans.

Highlights of the 2022 Report:

- 1. 2022 China’s GDP growth target.** The 2022 Report aims to maintain GDP growth of at least 5.5%, which, although the lowest in the last decade, remains relatively ambitious;
- 2. Economic stimulus.** China has indicated that new measures will be taken to reduce taxes on businesses, especially in the manufacturing and small business sectors (with annual revenues of up to 5 million yuan). For small taxpayers, the payment of VAT will be temporarily suspended;
- 3. Promoting investment.** Beijing has said 640 billion yuan (about \$100 billion) will be invested, especially in the infrastructure sector;
- 4. Foreign trade and investment.** Great emphasis is placed on stabilising imports and exports. Among the plans is the increase in the availability of export credits, promoting the export of high-quality products and services, and offering various financial incentives;
- 5. Strategy to combat COVID.** The strategy of zero tolerance is being continued, COVID

research is being expanded, preventive mechanisms are being improved, and ways to reduce the impact on economic and trade activities at the outbreak are being sought;

- 6. Reduction of unemployment.** The unemployment rate in China in 2021 was 5.1% (youth unemployment between the ages of 16 and 24 was 14.3% in December 2021). Additional incentives will be offered this year to businesses that keep jobs stable, additional resources will be offered to businesses in the field of youth employment, and financial compensation will be offered to businesses.

Shares of major Chinese companies fell in value this year; this was strongly influenced by a U.S. statement about the possible delisting of five Chinese companies from the U.S. stock exchange¹⁴. Shares of major Chinese companies plummeted on 11 March: Alibaba -6.56%, Baidu -5.14%, JD.com -15.67% and Hong Kong’s overall HangSeng Tech index fell by 7.55%¹⁵. Investors have been adversely affected by Beijing’s tough policy on technology companies, the COVID outbreak and potential threats stemming from China’s ambiguous stance on the Russia-Ukraine war.

However, the value of the shares recovered significantly after a statement from Deputy Prime Minister Liu He, Xi Jinping’s chief economic adviser, sought to reassure investors. The statement emphasised that Beijing would take active steps to maintain financial stability and economic growth. Liu also assured that the central government will take all measures to pursue economic policies that benefit the markets. Following the statement, the value of Chinese stocks shot up, the US media stated that Chinese stocks are experiencing the best times in recent history¹⁶. The Hong Kong Hang Seng Index (HSI) rose by 9.1% (the highest single-day growth since 2008). However, while China’s economic growth outlook is positive, Chinese corporate stocks are expected to remain volatile due to Beijing’s determination to pursue a zero-tolerance COVID policy. China’s approach to the Russia-Ukraine war could also have a negative impact on investor decisions.

COVID pandemic and economic impact.

Earlier this year, the number of new COVID cases in China shot to new heights: the average was about 180 cases a day, and at the end of March, the average was about 2,200 cases a day. Different levels of restrictions were imposed in March in Shenzhen (17.5 million inhabitants), Shanghai (25 million), Jilin (24 million) and Dong Yuan (10 million). Factories and businesses were also restricted.¹⁷ The closure of Shanghai will have a particularly negative impact. On March 27, the Shanghai authorities announced a partial closure of the city and a severe restriction on movement and economic activity, which will have a negative impact on world trade¹⁸.

Beijing is working hard to strike an effective balance between managing the pandemic and promoting economic recovery. Citi analysts forecast China's first-quarter GDP growth to slow by about 0.8% due to the latest wave¹⁹. However, while China's zero COVID policy is having a particularly negative impact on the country's economy, there are fears that looser restrictions could lead to a bigger wave of the virus and destabilise society. On March 17, Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed that the country must stop the spread of the virus as soon as possible and

continue China's dynamic zero-COVID policy.²⁰ Although the economic cost of this strategy is high, maintaining domestic stability is Beijing's top priority in the run-up to the CCP Congress.

The reaction of the Chinese media and society to the war in Ukraine.

As in the West, the Chinese media paid close attention to the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, with 6 of the 10 top news stories related to the war in Ukraine on the first day of the conflict. However, inside China, the events in Ukraine are covered in a rather unusual light, closely related to the positioning of Beijing as a neutral peacekeeper without clear support for a particular side. In the early days of the conflict, coverage of the Chinese state media was partially balanced, citing both Ukrainian and Russian sources. However, the narrative of the official media later became more concentrated, the Russian side prevailed, emphasising the "complex and deeply rooted" problem of Ukraine, and criticising NATO's expansion to the East, which led to the conflict in Ukraine.

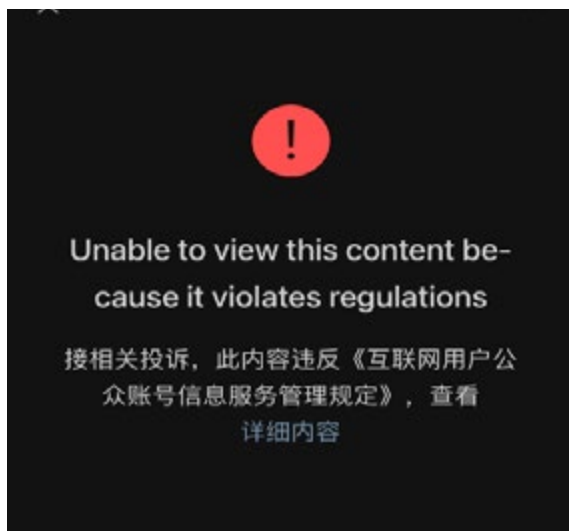
Despite the consistent narrative of China's state media, events in Ukraine on the smaller media, social networks, and private portals are



Social networks and smaller media cover the events in Ukraine in a more varied way, focusing on refugees, the experiences of Ukrainians and the destruction of property in Ukraine. The state media avoids talking about emotionally sensitive topics.

portrayed indeed unusually, especially in light of Beijing's censorship policy. Although the pro-Russian narrative is more noticeable, there are also quite a few pro-Ukrainian records and articles in the public space. Even records and comments expressing support for Russia do not show love for Russia: this position is based on strong anti-Western sentiments and a negative attitude towards NATO.

The attitude and reaction of Chinese intellectuals to the war in Ukraine has also attracted the attention not only of China but also of the world. On February 26, five prominent Chinese history professors published a joint open letter²¹ condemning Russia for attacking Ukraine. The statement was removed but managed to spread online²². On February 28, a petition condemning Russia's actions was published online, signed by more than 130 Chinese alumni from prestigious universities. It called on Beijing to honour its 1994 commitments²³, in which China promised to provide security guarantees to non-nuclear-weapon states. This petition has also since been removed from Chinese public space.



This message is often seen in Chinese public space. Records that openly support one side of the conflict in Ukraine are being removed.

Perhaps the focus was on an essay by influential academician Hu Wei, published on the US-China Perception Monitor. According to the author, China must end ties with Vladimir Putin as soon

as possible because of the war in Ukraine. Hu stressed that in doing so, China will avoid being on the side of the losers and prevent greater confrontation with the US and the West.²⁴ Wang Huiyao, president of the China Analytical Centre, also gave a critical assessment of the situation in The New York Times, stressing the need for China to become more involved in fighting the conflict. However, these statements by Chinese academics within China are strictly censored, and the authors themselves have received extremely negative criticism from the Chinese society.

Southeast Asia and Taiwan: Diversity of Approaches to War in Ukraine

On 26 February, the Foreign Ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) issued a joint statement²⁵ on the situation in Ukraine, expressing concern over military escalation, but stopping short of condemning Russia's actions. Although the tone of this statement is gentle, the very announcement of a united ASEAN response is significant, given that the ASEAN did not provide any joint response to the Russia-Ukraine war that began in 2014 and the annexation of Crimea.

Most countries in the region unanimously supported the UN General Assembly resolution on the war in Ukraine, which showed a rather unusual unity with the rest of the world (141 countries supported the resolution, 5 voted against, 35 abstained). Of the Southeast Asian countries, only Laos and Vietnam refrained from condemning Russia's military action (although Myanmar has supported the resolution, Myanmar's UN spokesman Kyaw Moe Tun, who was appointed before Myanmar's military coup, does not reflect the official views of the pro-Russian military junta in Myanmar). However, despite the rather unusual unity of the countries in the region, this resolution has a more symbolic meaning. The real official position of the countries in the region is ambiguous, with significant differences.

Positions of Southeast Asian countries on the war in Ukraine.

Brunei. On 26 February, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brunei expressed concern over the situation in Ukraine and condemned any action that violated its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity²⁶. Russia was not mentioned in the official statement.

Cambodia. Given the long history of relations between Cambodia and Russia, the country's position on the war in Ukraine has been quite harsh and critical. In support of the country's decision to support a UN General Assembly resolution, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen assured that "the country does not support the use of force" and "hopes that both sides will understand the country's position"²⁷. However, the country did not directly condemn Russia: Hun Sen stressed that Cambodia would not support either side and directed his criticism at the EU, which he accused of Europeanising the conflict and obstructing the possibility of resolving the conflict through dialogue. On March 17, the country's prime minister also stated that, in accordance with humanitarian principles, Cambodia is also ready to accept Ukrainian war refugees if they decide to enter the country²⁸

Indonesia. Although Indonesia has supported the UN General Assembly's resolution and the establishment of an independent commission to investigate possible human rights violations during the war, the prevailing mood in the country's public space is fundamentally different. Online support for Russia is significant, a pro-Russian narrative prevails, and some academics have also expressed support for Russia's actions²⁹. Such prevailing moods in society are fuelled by strong anti-American and anti-Western attitudes. Public sentiment has intensified in the wake of the US War on Terror. Anti-Western attitudes are based on this Muslim country's criticism of Western duplicity: it is emphasised that the West's rapid and decisive response to the war in Ukraine is fundamentally different from the West's reaction and position on Palestine. The prevailing mood in Indonesia has much in common with the position of the Chinese society: the critical attitude stems not from sympathy for Putin but from a negative attitude towards the West and the perception that NATO's expansion to the East as the main cause of this conflict.

Laos. Laos has extremely close relations with Russia. This has led to Laos's decision to abstain at the UN General Assembly. A statement issued by the Laotian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the situation in Ukraine on 26 February confirmed that "Laos is closely following the complicated and sensitive situation in Ukraine" and called for a "diplomatic solution". Russia was not mentioned in the statement.

Malaysia. In a statement issued on 26 February, the Malaysian Prime Minister expressed serious concern about the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine and called on the UN Security Council to play an active role in resolving the conflict peacefully³⁰. Russia was not mentioned in the statement. On 8th March, the Malaysian foreign minister said the country did not support the imposition of unilateral sanctions and assured that Malaysia would not join Western sanctions. Ukraine's and Russia's total trade with Malaysia accounts for only about 0.5% of total foreign trade³¹.

Myanmar. The military junta ruling Myanmar directly supported Russia's actions in Ukraine and blamed the Ukrainian authorities and people for causing the conflict. This position of Myanmar is not surprising: many Myanmar officers were trained in Russia. With the West imposing an arms embargo, Russia has become a major supplier of military equipment to Myanmar³².

Philippines. The President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, emphasised that the Philippines would take a neutral stance on the war in Ukraine. The president also acknowledged that the current situation "hurts" because Duterte considers Putin his friend³³.

Singapore. In the Southeast Asian region, Singapore's position is the strongest and contrasts significantly with the overall ASEAN position. Singapore has officially condemned Russia's military action against Ukraine³⁴ and decided to impose unilateral sanctions on Russia. The sanctions package includes restrictions on exports of certain goods, restrictions on some Russian banks and transactions with Russia. According to Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, this strong response was based on the conviction that such Russian de-

cision was an “existential threat to Singapore” and stressed that “a world order based on the use of force is extremely dangerous for the security and safety of small states’ survival”.

Thailand. Thai Foreign Ministry issued a statement expressing concern over tensions in Europe and escalation of conflict³⁵. In subsequent statements, Thailand assured that the country would adhere to the principle of neutrality and seek to maintain friendly relations with all parties. Russian tourists make up a large part of the Thai tourism sector, and the Thai economy, which was affected by the COVID pandemic, could be hit hard by rising fuel and living costs. In a survey conducted by Bangkok Post, 52.40% of respondents said they were closely monitoring the Russia-Ukraine conflict, while only 3.85% said they were unconcerned with the Ukraine-Russia conflict³⁶.

East Timor. It is the only country in the region outside the ASEAN bloc. The country has had a particularly strong reaction: Russia has been condemned for its actions against Ukraine³⁷.

Vietnam. Since the Soviet era, the Communist Party of Vietnam has maintained close ties with Russia, so Vietnam’s position has been cautious. Vietnam’s ambassador to the UN has said the country respects international law and sovereignty³⁸. However, the pro-Russian narrative does not dominate the Vietnamese press, and the situation on Ukraine is portrayed in relatively neutral light. Vietnam’s Prime Minister Fam Min Tin (Pham Minh Chinh) said at a 31-month diplomatic conference in Vietnam that the country “will not pick sides”³⁹.

Taiwan’s response to Russia’s military action in Ukraine was swift and harsh. In an official statement on 25 February, the Taiwanese authorities condemned Russia’s war in Ukraine and assured that Taiwan was joining the international community in sanctioning Russia.⁴⁰ Sanctions against Russia were discussed at a meeting of the Taiwanese government on 28 February, with the Taiwanese authorities assuring of a thorough review of trade with Russia on the basis of an export control list including electronic components, computers, high-tech devices and other dual-use items. Taiwan’s move to impose sanctions on Russia will not have significant consequences for Taiwan’s economy. According to the Taiwanese Ministry of Economic Affairs, bilateral trade between Russia and Taiwan in 2021 was insignificant and amounted to \$6.306 billion. Of these, Taiwan’s exports to Russia were only \$ 1.318 billion (0.76% of total Taiwanese exports).⁴¹ However, Taiwan’s embargo on semiconductors and microprocessors will have a particularly severe effect on Russia: Russia is dependent on TSMC-produced semiconductors for computers and smart devices, which are also used for military purposes.⁴² However, several Taiwanese companies, such as Asus, Acer and MSI, have not yet decided to close down their activities in Russia⁴³.

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