



Backing Russia Is Costing China In Europe

May 30, 2023 **Joshua Eisenman, Ilan I. Berman** *Foreign Policy*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; China; Russia; Ukraine

Last month, China's special representative for Eurasian affairs, Li Hui, visited Kyiv, Warsaw, Berlin, Paris, and Brussels with "a clear message": European governments should view Beijing as an alternative to Washington, and recognize Ukrainian territories seized by Moscow as belonging to Russia in order to quickly end the war. These overtures fit a larger pattern; for some time now, in its dealings with Europe, China has promoted the concept of "strategic autonomy" from the United States, arguing that the continent should go its own way in international affairs.

For Beijing, dividing the United States and Europe makes good strategic sense, since it would weaken the Western bloc and enhance China's influence on the world stage. The concept of strategic autonomy also appeals to like-minded political elements in Europe who have long sought, albeit for very different reasons, to pull Brussels and Washington apart.

Some European leaders are on board. Following his recent trip to China, French President Emmanuel Macron argued that Europe faces a "great risk" of getting "caught up in crises that are not ours, which prevents it from building its strategic autonomy." Those sentiments were, of course, promptly trumpeted by China's state media.

But Macron's once mainstream views are now out of touch. Today, Europe is more united than at any time in recent memory—mostly as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Much to Beijing's chagrin, Moscow's campaign of aggression against its western neighbor has breathed new life into the NATO alliance and forged a durable consensus on the continent about the need to roll back Russia's advances and thwart its persistent imperialist impulses. Even Germany, which for decades refused to provide arms to conflict zones, has made a historic policy shift in response to what Chancellor Olaf Scholz has called the "new reality," and is now providing considerable arms to Ukraine.

China, however, has gone its own way. Rather than condemning Russia's invasion, under the guise of "neutrality," Beijing has opted to provide economic and diplomatic cover for Moscow. This strategy has kept the Chinese economy stocked with cheap oil, timber, and other resources during a marked economic downturn, and has allowed Beijing to position itself internationally as a peacemaker. But it has also come at a cost. China's willingness to turn a blind eye to Russian atrocities has profoundly damaged its credibility in European capitals and undercut its push for European strategic autonomy from the United States.

This tension was on display during Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang's recent trip to Germany, which was billed as an opportunity to find common ground but did not go as planned. During the visit, Qin and his German counterpart, Annalena Baerbock, squared off, correcting each other in an unscripted fashion that is rare at high-level diplomatic press conferences. "Neutrality means taking the side of the aggressor, and that is why our guiding principle is to make it clear that we are on the side of the victim," Baerbock admonished Qin.

And Germany is far from alone. In mid-May, Japan invited Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to attend the G-7 summit in Hiroshima, where the issues of China's military buildup, mounting debt in the global south, and Russia's war in Ukraine took center stage. In his remarks, European Council President Charles Michel summed up Brussels's position: "Given its role in the international community and the size of its economy, China has a special responsibility in the world. It has to play by international rules. And we call on China to press Russia to stop its military aggression."

To be sure, relations between Europe and China were deteriorating even before Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022. Security concerns about Huawei telecommunications equipment, Chinese espionage and police stations, the wielding of trade restrictions to punish EU members, and, of course, repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, have all dogged China-EU relations. In April, the Netherlands intelligence services identified China as "the greatest threat to Dutch economic security." Perhaps the most telling example of these rising European concerns was the EU's 2021 decision to halt the long-anticipated China-EU investment agreement—which had passed the European Parliament by a 599-30 vote just months earlier.

But China's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made matters significantly worse. For a year and a half, China has sat on the fence, buying Russian resources and regurgitating the Kremlin's propaganda without officially recognizing Moscow's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory. However, Beijing may soon face a critical foreign-policy choice—one that will reverberate for decades to come. If Ukraine's long-anticipated counteroffensive decisively shifts the contours of the conflict, China will need to decide whether its "no limits" partnership with Russia is still worth the cost, or if it would be better served to dial back its support for Moscow in an effort to resuscitate its relations with European capitals.

With each passing day, it is becoming increasingly apparent that Beijing cannot have it both ways for much longer.

Joshua Eisenman is Senior Fellow for China Studies at the American Foreign Policy Council. Ilan Berman is the Council's Senior Vice President.