

China's signposts post-Ukraine

by M. K. Bhadrakumar*



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(Picture ma)

Traditionally, the Chinese foreign minister holds press conferences on the margins of the sessions of the National People's Congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. The press conference by State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi¹ on Sunday

marking the fifth session of the 13th NPC had added significance due to the confrontation between the US and Russia, an epochal event.

Analysts, especially Indians, form facile opinions that China is the "winner" and that a new alignment of "Russia and China versus the West" is the new paradigm in international politics. They overlook that the Marxist-Leninist philosophy fundamentally differs from the traditional notion of the balance of power.

Rather, it sees the world as evolving according to the laws of history. Thus, a favourable co-relation of world forces, as seems to be developing around China presently, is an outcome of the forces of history that creates conditions for further progress for the world community.

China does not regard the international system as the battlefield of two antagonistic camps, notwithstanding the efforts by the US to create precisely such a divide in terms of socio-economic and political systems, paths of development, policies.

Wang's presentation on the future directions of Chinese diplomacy is principally notable for its projection of China as "a responsible major country" that has a special role to uphold multilateralism in the emergent situation.

China indeed sees itself as a "more confident, self-reliant, open and inclusive" participant after



China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi gave a press conference for the Fifth session of China's 13th National People's Congress on foreign policy issues, Beijing, 7 March 2022. (Photo www.fmpr.gov.cn)

the great success of the Beijing Olympic Winter Games, frustrating all "politically-motivated attempts of disruption and sabotage" by the US and a clutch of allies.

The salience lies in a reinvigorated Chinese diplomacy to build bridges with Europe. Thus, on Ukraine, China adopts "an objective and impartial attitude" based on independent assessments and on the "merits of the issue," while also stressing that a variety of complex reasons precipitated the current situation.

That is to say, the "principle of indivisible security" and "legitimate security concerns" of Russia were ignored, whereas, long-term stability will depend crucially on putting in place a "balanced, effective and sustainable European security architecture." Indeed, this is basic to the Russian approach.

Therefore, Chinese diplomacy will encourage Europeans to (re)build bridges with Russia, which in turn demands that Europe strengthens its own strategic autonomy and independence to move in such a direction. China is set to intensify its engagement with European countries.

Significantly, *President Xi Jinping held a virtual summit*² on 8 March with French President *Emmanuel Macron* and German Chancellor *Olaf Scholz*, where he voiced support for Paris and Berlin "promoting a balanced, effective and sustainable European security framework for the in-

* M. K. Bhadrakumar has worked for about three decades as a career diplomat in the service of the Indian Foreign Ministry. He has served as ambassador to the former Soviet Union, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Germany and Turkey. His texts mainly deal with Indian foreign policy and events in the Middle East, Eurasia, Central Asia, South Asia and Pacific Asia. His blog is called "Indian Punchline".

terests and lasting security of Europe, and by upholding its *strategic autonomy*.” [Emphasis added.]

The big news out of Wang Yi’s press conference is China’s offer “to carry out necessary mediation.” Germany reportedly has sought Chinese mediation (in what is essentially a European issue.) Such a thing has never happened in history! And this has the backing of France, too!

Wang scattered the delusional reports in the Biden administration’s information war that Beijing has edged closer to the US for a few pieces of silver. Whereas, Wang put his finger on the reason behind today’s crisis: “Some major country (US), trying to hold on to its hegemony, has resurrected Cold War mentality and stoked bloc confrontation. This has fueled instability and division, and added trouble to a world already facing so many challenges.”

Chinese diplomacy will strive to place Beijing as a focal point for peace, cooperation, interdependency, inclusiveness, dialogue and common security. China’s advocacy of multilateralism and economic globalization and its robust opposition to US hegemony and its “bloc politics” will be central themes.

The Chinese diplomacy will highlight China being “an anchor for stability,” win-win cooperation, and a new type of international relations and a world community with a shared future.

The China-Russia partnership will remain “rock-solid” based on a common vision on the world order opposed to “attempts to revive the Cold War mindset or provoke ideology-based confrontation” but at the same time it is based on “non-alliance” and is “grounded in a clear logic of history and driven by strong internal dynamics.” This *merits attention*.³

Clearly, the Biden administration’s attempts to create daylight between Beijing and Moscow, including numerous phone calls lately by US Secretary of State *Antony Blinken* to Wang, have floundered. Wang reserved very strong language to express Beijing’s indignation over Biden administration’s policies toward China.

Not only that Biden failed to put into practice his verbal assurance to Xi personally, Wang said, “The reality we have seen is this: the US is going to great lengths to engage in intense, zero-sum competition with China, it keeps provoking China on issues concerning our core interests, and it is taking a string of actions to

piece together small blocs to suppress China. These actions undermine the overall China-US relations and disrupt and erode international peace and stability... We have every right to do what is necessary to firmly defend our legitimate interests.”

Thus, Wang has left an important signpost: “China and Europe are two major forces for world peace, two big markets for common development and two great civilizations for human progress. The China-Europe relationship is not targeted at any third party, nor is it subjugated to or controlled by any third party. Dialogue and cooperation between the two sides on the basis of mutual respect and mutual benefit will add more stabilizing factors to an unstable world... We will continue to support the independence of Europe ...”

That said, China’s extensive global network of friends and partners will remain the basic template of its diplomacy, where BRI continues to be important. But Wang also hinted that BRI is transforming – “advancing high-quality...higher-level cooperation, better cost-effectiveness, higher-quality supply and stronger development resilience” graduating to a new “belt of development.” (Incidentally, France has teamed up with China on projects in Central Europe.)

China will prioritize the US’ Indo-Pacific strategy, which is “stoking geopolitical rivalry.” Wang said:

“From strengthening the Five Eyes to peddling the Quad, from piecing together AUKUS to tightening bilateral military alliances, the US is staging a “five-four-three-two” formation in the Asia-Pacific.”

Chinese diplomacy’s counterstrategy will be to weaken “the small, divisive circles” that US is creating regionally by fostering a broad, inclusive platform of friendly, cooperative regional states with “a shared future” as its motto. The centrality of ASEAN is self-evident.

From the Indian perspective, what stands out is that Chinese diplomacy has adopted a conciliatory tone. China is conscious of the US efforts to queer the pitch of India-China relations. Clearly, China expects India to charter an independent course.

Wang invoked an Indian proverb: “Help your brother’s boat across, and your own will reach the shore.” The Chinese grievance is that the Indian leadership turned its back on the strategic consensus reached at summit meetings (prior

to India's adventurous forays into Chinese territory in Doklam in 2017) – that the two countries “pose no threat but offer development opportunities to each other”; that they would “continue to build mutual trust, avoid misunderstanding and miscalculation, so that we will be partners for mutual success instead of adversaries of mutual attrition.”

Wang spoke with disappointment peppered with residual hopes rather than in acrimony. Paradoxically, even as China is better placed today than ever before internationally, it is still seeking common ground with India. There is nothing of the accusatory tone that Wang reserved for Japan. The contrast couldn't be sharper.

Post-Ukraine, we may expect a certain unravelling of the US' Indo-Pacific strategy as its European allies increasingly prefer to plough own pathways toward Beijing. Conceivably, the

US will be left to huddle with its three Asian underlings on the Quad platform.

Washington sees Japanese PM Kishida's overnight trip to Delhi next week as an attempt to pin down India. Japan has shifted to an overly hostile posture toward Russia in lockstep with the Biden administration – even sanctioning President Putin's personal assets! Japan is frantic that the US and NATO's defeat gives a devastating blow to its strategic calculus. Kishida will try to mitigate Japan's isolation by seducing the Indian leadership to stay away from China and Russia.

Source: <https://www.indianpunchline.com/chinas-signposts-post-ukraine/>, 9 March 2022

¹ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220308_10649559.html

² https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220308_10649839.html

³ <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>