

This column by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, March 22, 2022.



Opinion

Ukraine crisis calls for China to take part in a daring diplomatic intervention



- China has staked out a position ambiguous enough to allow quick movement away from the perception of complicity with Moscow
- Clear thinking by Beijing is of the utmost importance to end Russia's shelling of Ukraine and to keep the world from tipping into nuclear catastrophe

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Published: 1:30am, 22 Mar, 2022



Illustration: Craig Stephens

It is imperative that Chinese President Xi Jinping's government continues to edge away from the bleak dark shadow of Russia's [invasion of Ukraine](#) and resettle itself geopolitically into a better place. While it would be presumptuous to offer a detailed plan of action on how to advance by retreating, nothing less is needed right now from China's leader.

China need not rush, of course, but it should not hesitate to separate itself from what clearly is wrong. Recalibrating its Russia policy might not even be as torturous for Beijing as it might seem.

Though there have been rumours that Russian President Vladimir Putin had locked in China's support when he [met Xi](#) in early February, China has staked out a position ambiguous enough to allow quick movement away from the perception of complicity with Moscow.

From the outset, China was tepid about the invasion, though not openly anti-war. Weeks ago, Foreign Minister Wang Yi laid out the tentative template, saying: "The current situation is not what we want to see." Day after day, that line has held.

China should not backtrack from that obvious but helpful insinuation by hiding behind some relativistic blind or moaning anew about a past century's humiliations by the West. What's more, reminding the world of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, pursued without United Nations Security Council authorisation, hardly lessens the infamy of Russia's Ukrainian *spetsoperatsiya* of 2022.

Special operation or not, it was wholly unsanctioned by the UN. When the Security Council sought to condemn it, Russia played its veto card. But the play was one-handed as [China abstained](#) and bought itself some time. Thinking carefully about another member state's invasion of a sovereign state is not the worst idea ever. Xi and his team would appear to be avoiding a diplomatic and global perception blunder.

In playing the Nazi card – trying to recycle Russia's past glory by conjuring up the tangible villain of countless Nazis hiding in Ukrainian barns and low-profile oblasts – Putin pushed imagination into prevarication. We are expected to believe that just as Joseph Stalin taught Adolph Hitler a lesson, Putin would finish the job by defeating what he says is a [pro-Nazi neighbour](#).

Putin's pounding of Ukraine with [rockets and missiles](#) under the guise of "denazification" is hard to swallow. Now Putin himself has become something akin to a [latter-day Nazi](#) in world public opinion.

Clear thinking by Beijing is now of the utmost importance. In a speech in 1945, Albert Camus made a heartfelt plea for humanity to reject the gross downsizing of absolute values for short-term reasons of social engineering or, worse, the absolutism of racial or ethnic superiority.

The French journalist, philosopher, novelist and playwright insisted: "We must preserve intelligence ... A few years ago, when the Nazis had just taken power, [Hermann Goering] would give a true idea of their philosophy by declaring: 'When people talk to me about intelligence, I take out my revolver.' And that philosophy spread beyond Germany."

Without a persistent intelligence in regulating the conduct of nations, a peaceful and stable world order is inconceivable.

The Russian and American governments don't have to manufacture a romance to settle the world's nerves, but it wouldn't hurt if they were not at each other's throats. We remain under the threat of extinction by nuclear war. Tellingly, Putin recently [reminded the world](#) that if his war doesn't go his way, he still could opt to use nuclear weapons.

Putin's state of mind is of immense concern if he is so sure of being right about his Ukraine "special operation" that he would risk even one chance in a hundred of bringing the world closer to nuclear catastrophe. That is not thinking, it is curling up and rolling everyone towards immolation.

This is why Beijing must be involved in a responsible, if daring, diplomatic intervention. Some might see such a move as out of character for China, but Beijing hosted and chaired the [six-party talks](#) to resolve

conflicts over North Korea's nuclear programme. Maybe the foreign ministry could offer to host similar multiparty talks in conjunction with a ceasefire.

China is changing, and in ways the Chinese themselves might not understand. Like it or not, China is a central player in the 21st century. It can be forgiven an abstention at the Security Council, but it cannot expect that the world will believe its sincerity when the spectre of World War III surfaces unless it does something special.

Camus put this matter bluntly, in statements that have implications for nation-states that truly believe in the need for a shared world of peace and stability.

He noted that "man's strongest temptation is the temptation of inertia" but "no man can die peacefully if he has not at least once risked his own life and that of others, and if he has not done what is necessary for the overall human condition to be made as peaceful as possible." We must avoid "the world of silence; in other words, the world of violence".

The [meeting in Rome](#) last week between top American and Chinese foreign policy officials was anything but rote. It was also striking how little of substance has emerged. One might guess here that both sides agreed that loose lips could sink the start of something big. That, at least, is the hope, even if it risks being overly optimistic yet again.

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