

# Public Opinions in China about Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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This report intends to analyze and compare public opinions in China about Russia's "special military Action" in Ukraine. Information cited comes from both mainstream mass media and non-mainstream social media, printed or online, including newspapers and YouTube videos.

In China, public opinions are overwhelmingly sympathetic to Russia and critical of the five waves of eastward expansion of NATO into Russia's borders, calling the later the "root cause" of the crises, going so far as to condemn Zelenski's anti-Russian policies as "inviting a rightful punishment;" and this position is very similar to the one upheld by some conservative Republicans such as Congressman Madison Cawthorn from North Carolina, or to the one expressed by Professor John Mearsheimer, a Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor in the Political Science Department at the University of Chicago since 1982.

After Canadian Embassy in Beijing installed at its exterior walls lighted signs in favor of Ukraine's resistance, some people in Beijing sprayed graffiti on its walls. When French Embassy published in WeChat two pieces of news with photos supporting Ukraine, Chinese netizens express their anger by uploading 15,000 comments digging up France's dark history of colonial rule in Africa and Indo-China, its invasion and destruction of the Yuan Ming Yuan Imperial Garden in Beijing more than 100 years ago, and massacre of Native-Americans, demanding France to make reparation to China, citing French writer Victor Hugo's anti-war statement, and condemning the "double-standards" of the French government ("*French Embassy in China Denouncing Invasion and Supporting Ukraine to Miserably Invite Wrath of Chinese Netizens*," page A12, China's Metropolitan section, Saturday, March 12, 2022, Chinese L.A. Daily News - Taiwan Times).

Chinese commentators with more or less "neutral" positions believe that although Russia is an aggressor that has obviously violated international laws, Ukraine is a provocateur causing the war to occur by suppressing ethnic-Russians' fundamental human right in Donbas, and by attempting to join the NATO, threatening the security of Russia. These conclusions are analogous to a scenario where a wealthy tycoon (Russia) owns a mansion, another family (Ukraine) owns a smaller house next to it, broadcasts loud music everyday especially at midnight, and tries to lease its garage to an outsider (NATO) who has been a long-time rival to the tycoon, for storing a lot of bombs and other explosives; fearing a pending disaster, the tycoon preemptively orders his private armed security guards to thrust through the entrance of the smaller house and beats up the owner, without first asking the police department (the United Nations) for a permit. This type of "neutrality" is analogous to what a famous Chinese proverb describes as "striking both suspects 50 times each with a heavy wooden rod."

Other opinions seem to be worrying about Russia's possible defeat in the conflict. Mr. Hu Xijin, former Editor-in-Chief of The Global Times (<https://www.huanqiu.com/>), a news media specialized in reporting international news to China's audience, under the People's Daily, official organ of the Chinese Communist Party, expressed his opinion on March 2, 2022, in his private WeChat account, about the current situation in Ukraine, indicating that if no quick solution is found to end the conflict and Russia continues to fight a protracted war, then Russia might face the danger of a US-sponsored "Color Revolution" leading to domestic upheavals; and that the outcomes would determine the impact of the war on global politics. Hu believes that if Putin wins the war, he will eliminate NATO's "existential threat" to Russia by the incorporation of former Soviet satellite states into the Western System, and thus wins in his counter-attack against the "aggressive expansion" of American influence up to the its borders, and decrease the power of the "American hegemony;" if Russia loses the war, then it might face the danger of political instability or even a "Color Revolution." Hu also believes that the war in Ukraine has frightened European countries into deeper dependency on US protection, and more intensive hostility towards Russia, therefore, even if Russia wins, the victory is limited. Hu also believes that neither Russia nor the United States could afford to lose this war, which is a life-or-death struggle for Russia; and that the key to the final outcome is whether Russia could stand up on its feet vis-à-vis the comprehensive sanctions imposed by the West ("*Hu Xijin: Color Revolution Might Occur If Russia Suffers Defeat in the War*," page A13, China-II section, Friday, March 4, 2022, The World Journal, [www.worldjournal.com](http://www.worldjournal.com)).



“You Have Blood on Your Hand” photo-illustration by Edward Locke

The above-mentioned Professor John Mearsheimer has been one of the most famous critics of American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. As a proponent of realistic great-power politics, Mearsheimer has argued that the eastward expansion of NATO and strengthening of friendly relations with Ukraine has increased the likelihood of war between nuclear-armed powers and laid the groundwork for Putin’s aggressive position toward Ukraine. In 2014, after Russia annexed Crimea, Mearsheimer wrote that “the United States and its European allies share

most of the responsibility for this crisis.” With regards to the current invasion of Ukraine, Mearsheimer maintains his position that the US is at fault for provoking Putin. “The Russians made it unequivocally clear at the time that they viewed this as an existential threat, and they drew a line in the sand. Nevertheless, what has happened with the passage of time is that we have moved forward to include Ukraine in the West to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia’s border. Of course, this includes more than just NATO expansion. NATO expansion is the heart of the strategy, but it includes E.U. expansion as well, and it includes turning Ukraine into a pro-American liberal democracy, and, from a Russian perspective, this is an existential threat. [...] If Ukraine becomes a pro-American liberal democracy, and a member of NATO, and a member of the E.U., the Russians will consider that categorically unacceptable. If there were no NATO expansion and no E.U. expansion, and Ukraine just became a liberal democracy and was friendly with the United States and the West more generally, it could probably get away with that. You want to understand that there is a three-prong strategy at play here: E.U. expansion, NATO expansion, and turning Ukraine into a pro-American liberal democracy. [...] It’s not imperialism; this is great-power politics. When you’re a country like Ukraine and you live next door to a great power like Russia, you have to pay careful attention to what the Russians think, because if you take a stick and you poke them in the eye, they’re going to retaliate. States in the Western hemisphere understand this full well with regard to the United States. [...] There’s no country in the Western hemisphere that we will allow to invite a distant, great power to bring military forces into that country. [...] We do have that say, and, in fact, we overthrew democratically elected leaders in the Western hemisphere during the Cold War because we were unhappy with their policies. This is the way great powers behave.”

Regarding Putin’s plan, Professor Mearsheimer does not believe that Putin “has designs on Kyiv;” he thinks that Putin is “interested in taking at least the Donbass, and maybe some more territory and eastern Ukraine, and, number two, he wants to install in Kyiv a pro-Russian government, a government that is attuned to Moscow’s interests. [...] Military might is built on economic might. You need an economic foundation to build a really powerful military. To go out and conquer countries like Ukraine and the Baltic states and to re-create the former Soviet Union or re-create the former Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe would require a massive army, and that would require an economic foundation that contemporary Russia does not come close to having. There is no reason to fear that Russia is going to be a regional hegemony in Europe. Russia is not a serious threat to the United States. [...] The Ukrainians have a vested interest in paying serious attention to what the Russians want from them. They run a grave risk if they alienate the Russians in a fundamental way. If Russia thinks that Ukraine presents an existential threat to Russia because it is aligning with the United States and its West European allies, this is going to cause an enormous amount of damage to Ukraine. That of course is exactly what’s happening now. So my argument is: the strategically wise strategy for Ukraine is to break off its close relations with the West, especially with the United States, and try to accommodate the Russians. If there had been no decision to move NATO eastward to include Ukraine, Crimea and the Donbass would be part of Ukraine today, and there would be no war in Ukraine. [...] I think there’s a serious possibility that the Ukrainians can work out some sort of modus vivendi with the Russians. And the reason is that the Russians are now discovering that occupying Ukraine and trying to run Ukraine’s politics is asking for big trouble.”

With regards to international politics in the post-Cold War era, Mearsheimer advocates that the United States should consider China as a “threatening” challenge and a “peer competitor,”

stating that “We should be pivoting out of Europe to deal with China in a laser-like fashion, number one. And, number two, we should be working overtime to create friendly relations with the Russians. [...] what we have done with our foolish policies in Eastern Europe is driving the Russians into the arms of the Chinese.” Although Mearsheimer’s idea about a model of US-Russia versus China Balance of Power Politics have offended China’s leadership and mainstream scholars who regard him as an advocate of the “Doctrine of China Threat,” paradoxically, his idea about a new Ukraine that is liberal and democratic, but not a member of either NATO or EU, and at the same time friendly to both Russia and the United States, but not “too close” to the later, is probably the closest American diplomatic opinion in line with China’s “neutrality” or “fence-sitting” policy. The above-mentioned Hu Xijin, though generally believed by conservative Chinese-Americans to be a “Warring Wolf,” actually share with Mearsheimer 100% of his the position on the root cause of the current crises in Ukraine, although Hu is categorically opposed to Mearsheimer’s “Doctrine of China threat.”

Similar to Mearsheimer, Thomas L. Friedman, one of America’s best known political commentators, is critical of NATO’s aggressive eastward expansion as an important root cause trickling the war in Ukraine. Friedman cited some interesting behind-the-scene stories. On May 2, 1998, after the United States Senate approved the expansion of NATO, he immediately phoned Georges Frost Kennan, architect of US Cold War against the former Soviet Union, asking his opinion about the issue. Kennan believed that this is a tragic mistake leading towards a new Cold War, which shall make the souls of the Founding Fathers feel unhappy; he believed that the aim of the Cold War was to contain Soviet Communism; but Russia has moved to democracy and posed no threat to the West; therefore, the expansion of NATO was not necessary and not sustainable because the United States does not have enough resources to handle it (“*The Ukraine Crises: Putin Started the War out of Ambitions, But the United States and NATO is Not innocent Either*,” B4, Topics in the Americas section, Saturday, February 26, 2022, Zhong Guo Daily News).

Inside China, a few people expressed sympathy for Ukraine and opposition to Russia’s “Special Military Operation.” As reported in Chinese L.A. News - Taiwan Times (“*Not All Chinese Support Putin Why the Whole World Only hears One Voice*,” page A13, China Metropolitan section, Saturday, March 5, 2022), and other news outlets recently, five Chinese professors signed an anti-war manifesto titled “Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine and Our Position;” some articles remind readers that historically Russia has annexed a large territory from China totaling up about one quarter of China’s territory during the period of the Great Qing Empire of China.

It has been reported in China’s social media that Professor Shi Yinhong (时殷弘), a well-known political science scholar, international strategist, expert on issues related to United States, Professor at the Institute of International Relations, People’s University of China, published online his opinion that, at present time, China should out of its own initiative give up nuclear weapons to gain trust and sympathy of the United States, should put down historic prejudice and forgive Japan’s war crime, and should let Japan be elected as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council. He immediately invites wrath from netizens, who believe that at the time when Russia is waving nuclear bombs to cause the west to tremble out of fear, and to defend Russia’s national security, Shi Yinhong’s remarks are signs of “high treason.”



"The Congressional GOP Pro-Putin Caucus," photo-illustration by Edward Locke

These anti-Russian or pro-Western opinions have not been able to gain support from mainstream public opinion, because due to US-China military standoff in Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, especially during former President Trump's Administration, nationalistic feeling in China is against both the United States and Taiwan, which most of Chinese regard as a "renegade province" or even a "puppet of the US and Japan." The current nationalistic sentiment of Chinese is not against Russia, the historical enemy. Actually, a lot of Chinese believe nowadays that Putin's Russia is China's natural ally to challenge "US and NATO hegemony." Some supporters of Putin even called his war in Ukraine a "liberation war" against US and NATO "imperialism," and they branded President Zelenski's government a "Nazi Regime." In addition, the root cause of anti-Ukraine feelings came from some economic issues that grew out of control during the latest years of President Zelenski's administration; these included confiscation of properties of Chinese investors in Ukraine due to real or alleged tax evasions, and cancelation of trade deals involving purchase of controlling stake in Ukraine's Motor Sich Joint Stock Company, one of the largest engine manufacturers for airplanes and helicopters worldwide, with military applications, by Chinese aviation firm Skyrizon, and its re-nationalization later in March 2021 by the Ukrainian government, for "national security" reasons, after intervention by US Senate Foreign Relation Committee member William C. Triplett. The above commercial disputes, some of them regarded as "politically motivated," have angered a large segment of Chinese netizens who ridiculed President Zelenski's government as a "puppet of the United States" even before the breakout of the current crises. The pro-Russian sentiment now fashionable comes primarily from two sources. First of all, Russian President Putin has returned a small area of territory in dispute to China, alleviating deep grievances among Chinese for Czarist Russia's annexation of large areas of Chinese territory. Secondly, Russia supports China on the issues of Taiwan and South China Sea Islands. These have completely reversed Chinese mentality regarding Russia that was very hostile since Chairman Mao broke off China's alliance with Soviet Union since the 1960s and cooperate with the United States to oppose the Soviets since Nixon's first visit to China in 1972.

The pro-Russian and anti-Ukraine remarks, together with some vulgar, sexist and erotic comments about "beautiful Ukraine ladies," "accepting beauties from Ukraine as refugees," or Ukraine being the "breasts and uterus of Europe," have caused some anger in Ukraine; thus, China's mainstream mass media started to call netizens not to make fun of the war; the government's control of online media made adjustment on policies, shutting down some accounts that made vulgar remarks; however, videos and articles supportive of Putin's war still surface in Chinese online media.

In summary, public opinions with regards to Ukraine crises in Mainland China varies widely, based on interpretation of history and current affairs, ideology and personal preferences. However, public opinions on the issue of Russia's "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine is, generally speaking, sympathetic to Russia.