China and Russia

by George Friedman - February 28, 2023

There has been a great deal of discussion about Chinese military aid to Russia. The United States warned Beijing against sending such aid, and Beijing responded by saying these continued reckless accusations would have consequences. The specter of a Chinese-Russian alliance against the United States seems catastrophic to many Americans, and the idea of Chinese weapons on the Ukrainian battlefield seems like a preface to disaster. But these concerns are misplaced.

It's true that China and Russia entered into a treaty just before the war in Ukraine. But it's also the case that the Chinese recoiled from the alliance once the war broke out. In fact, China was one of the few countries to abstain from a U.N. vote to condemn Russia just after the war started. The alliance was portrayed by both sides as a long-term commitment, not a collective defense pact. Beijing saw the war as something to avoid. With serious economic problems, a degree of domestic unrest at home, and the U.S. Navy lurking in and near the South China Sea, China's participation in a war – or even simply supporting Russia at the U.N. – rendered the alliance little more than a diplomatic bluff.

There are several reasons why China is unlikely to provide significant aid to Russia. Perhaps the most important is that China's economy continues to struggle. It relies heavily on exports and foreign investment. The threat of American sanctions alone would likely deter the Chinese, but involvement in Ukraine would probably incur sanctions from Europe too. Europe has invested much in containing Russia in Ukraine and in maintaining relations with the United States. Europe has nothing to gain from a Russian victory and potentially much to lose. The Chinese could not pay the price of American and European sanctions.

A second reason – one that dovetails from the first and is admittedly improbable – is the potential military response. Assuming China was undeterred by economic sanctions, the U.S. maintains significant military options. China's export-oriented economy can thrive only through maintaining access to open trade, specifically trade exiting its eastern ports. If another state blocks these ports and their sea lanes, however imperfectly, it could be catastrophic for Beijing. China could retaliate, of course, but doing so would likely not paralyze the U.S. war machine. The subsequent naval battle would, in any case, cripple Chinese trade even if Beijing "won" – and there's no guarantee that it would win. The bottom line is that China must keep trade routes open, and it would look to other avenues to save face.

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The third reason is a matter of practicality. The sheer distance between China's industrial base and the Ukrainian battlefield is substantial. Russia would likely need China's high-tech communication, battlefield management equipment and relatively lightweight weapons. These kinds of weapons require trained technicians and integration into Russian systems. Transporting large amounts of equipment and personnel would require air transport or rail. Any amount of equipment that would make a difference would require supply lines that would have to be protected. It's a daunting task that demands much more involvement than many think.

There are probably other reasons China won't send anything of import to Russia, but they are all subservient to the reality that China cannot afford the economic consequences. Things are difficult enough in China without opening up a front against the U.S. To be clear, Beijing could send small numbers of relatively inconsequential equipment, but that's hardly a prelude to World War III.

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