

СЕКЦІЯ 2. КИТАЙ В СУЧАСНОМУ СВІТІ: МІЖНАРОДНО-ПОЛІТИЧНИЙ АСПЕКТ

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MICROING: HOW RUSSIA COVERTLY KIDNAPS CHINESE STRATEGY

Key words: Chinese Strategy, Russia propaganda.

Historian of the Cold War, Shen Zhihua [1], shared a story like this: In 1958, there were some minor frictions between China and the Soviet Union. Nikita Khrushchev secretly visited China in an attempt to ease tensions and issued a joint statement. On August 4th, Khrushchev left Beijing, and on the 23rd, mainland China shelled Kinmen Island off the coast of Taiwan. In fact, the two sides did not discuss the Kinmen issue during the visit. Instead, Mao used Khrushchev’s visit as an endorsement, leading the outside world to believe that this action had been sanctioned by the Soviet Union.

In 2022, a similar script played out once again. Vladimir Putin visited China on February 4th during the Winter Olympics, and coincidentally, about twenty days later, Putin initiated the Ukraine conflict. This time, it wasn’t China hitching the Soviet Union to a war chariot; rather, it was Russia following a strategy once employed by Mao.

This has been a long-planned move, much like how Russia began amassing troops at its border since the middle of last year. Russia has also long been strategizing on how to leverage China’s power to the maximum extent. Therefore, right from the outset, Russia has been actively deploying its propaganda and diplomatic strategies against China. This is a covert battleground to the extent that even China’s official media was surprised by Russia’s actions and had no time to respond, while China’s public discourse was already filled with Russia’s war rhetoric.

In a video shared on September 8th by an advisor to the exiled mayor Petro Andryushchenko, Chinese singer Wang Fang stood on the balcony of the ruins of the Donetsk Regional Academic Drama Theater in the Donbas region. Earlier this year, this theater, along with most of the city’s other

theater buildings, was destroyed during the conflict, resulting in the loss of over 600 civilian lives. Against the backdrop of this war-torn city, she sang a Chinese version of the military song “Katyusha”.

Instances like the singer Wang Fang and her husband visiting the Mariupol Opera House can easily lead the Ukrainian public to mistakenly believe that there is overwhelming pro-Russian sentiment in China, from the government to the general population. In reality, this is not entirely the case. We need to roughly divide China’s political circle into two categories. People like Wang Fang and Zhou Xiaoping are essentially adherents and outsiders in the political circle. Zhou Xiaoping is a member of China’s Political Consultative Conference (in reality, a powerless institution) and has a large following on the Chinese social media platform, Sina Weibo.

Authoritarianism’s monopolistic and closed nature when it comes to political power has led to a political culture where those on the periphery of power, the “subordinates,” need to perform political loyalty in order to squeeze into the core circle. This way, they can gain support, attention, and connections from some individuals within that circle.

However, it is challenging for these individuals to become decision-makers. It needs to be acknowledged that the core figures in Chinese politics currently possess relatively mature political judgment. They are fully aware of the dangers of getting too close to Russia given China’s current situation. Therefore, China is attempting to maintain a delicate balance: it must use Russia’s power to counter the West, but it must also proceed cautiously to avoid crossing the red lines drawn by Washington.

In addition to Zhou Xiaoping and Wang Fang’s couple, there is Rao Jin, the owner of “April Net” – a nationalist portal with a limited audience, and Hong Yuan from the Institute of American Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. This team was received by the so-called leader of the “Donetsk People’s Republic”, Pushilin. This visit occurred on the eve of the illegal elections held in the newly annexed territories of Ukraine by Russia, which seemed like a premeditated attempt to gain international recognition for the elections through invited visits. Without a doubt, it had connections with individuals in the Kremlin.

Moscow understands that it cannot establish closer relations with China’s core decision-makers at the official level. Therefore, it has cleverly adopted an indirect approach: starting from the lower echelons of power, seeking the support of pro-Russian individuals in the periphery of power, and giving them media exposure. After the Wang Fang incident, you can observe several major Russian media outlets, such as “Russia Today” and “Sputnik”, enthusiastically reporting on this news. Subsequently, it quickly drew the attention of American media outlets like CNN. Following this, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry strongly condemned this act as a “moral decline”.

This chain reaction is precisely what the Kremlin wants to see. Although it has no impact on the political and military battlefield, it deepens the distrust of China among both the Ukrainian government and the general population. Moreover, given Zhou Xiaoping's identity, many people may once again link this with China's official stance.

This strategy has been jokingly referred to as “微操” (microing) by pro-Ukraine Chinese netizens, originally a term used in electronic gaming to describe extremely detailed operations and control techniques. Similar “微操” behaviors include Russian soldiers on the frontlines posting images on Telegram with food cans featuring Chinese characters, and the clear presence of the logo of the Chinese drone company DJI in images of Russian combat equipment, among others. It should be noted that not all of these actions are necessarily sanctioned by Moscow, but there appears to be a tendency in the Russian military and political circles to display and exaggerate the closeness of the China-Russia relationship in this war. Therefore, Ukraine needs to pay attention to the latest discourse in the Chinese public sphere about this war and remain vigilant about the “butterfly effect” in internet public opinion.

Sometimes, both China and Russia engage in necessary strategic contacts. China typically controls the scale of propaganda, while Moscow often brags about the results of negotiations, using ambiguous language to provoke the West and Ukraine. For instance, they may quote Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi as saying, “China and Russia share a common position in building a multipolar world”. While China emphasizes the “multipolar world”, Russian media may emphasize “a common position”.

Moscow is misleading not only the Ukrainian public but also Western intelligence agencies by suggesting that China is involved in Russia's war, even though the situation has not yet evolved to that point.

However, it's not just Russia that needs China; China also needs Russia. The relationship between Beijing and Moscow is like a “turn-based” game. Sometimes, it needs to cautiously get closer to Moscow to deter its Western adversaries and leave room for maneuver in technological sanctions. Other times, Beijing may distance itself from Moscow, but often, it's about carefully staying on the sidelines, with core decision-makers trying to master this diplomatic “timing” to keep things lukewarm.

Not all lower-level officials and policy implementers in China may understand this situation. When Beijing appears to be getting closer to Moscow in this “turn-based” game, some lower-level individuals often misunderstand leadership decisions, thinking it's a decisive move towards a full-fledged alliance. They may wrongly sense the wind and take proactive steps: initiating talks with Moscow on business projects, expanding trade cooperation, sending incorrect signals to lower levels of the bureaucratic

system, and promoting pro-Russian sentiments in the online space. Some, like Wang Fang and Zhou Xiaoping, even personally venture into Russian-occupied areas.

Currently, China's core decision-makers are unlikely to change their stance in the war. As mentioned earlier, China is facing economic troubles with a looming economic downturn, a bursting real estate bubble, severe investor confidence issues, and a rapidly shrinking capital market. Its immediate concern is how to rescue the struggling economy, which undoubtedly requires leveraging Western support. It will not voluntarily worsen relations with the West at this critical juncture.

Still, the Kremlin's repeated manipulation remains highly dangerous. It worsens China's precarious position in the court of international public opinion and narrows the international space China can maneuver in. To use an perhaps inappropriate analogy, the Kremlin's approach is more akin to the lowly act of sexual manipulation where it tries to persuade its victim: "We've come this far; you might as well yield to me, so both our situations can be optimized".

When Chinese decision-makers believe they have completely lost the trust of the West and Ukraine, and when the opportunity cost of not taking a bold action is smaller than the cost of maintaining a difficult posture of neutrality, they may indeed consider taking a decisive action.

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КИТАЙСЬКО-АМЕРИКАНСЬКІ ВІДНОСИНИ НА СУЧАСНОМУ ЕТАПІ

Ключові слова: Китай, Сполучені Штати Америки, дипломатія, міжнародні відносини, співробітництво.