

## **The Ukrainian Challenge to China's Leadership Politics: An Emerging Divergence in Foreign Policy and Its Impact on the 20th Party Congress**

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Despite China's pro-Russia stance with respect to the invasion of Ukraine, divergent perspectives exist among Chinese policy elites toward the Ukraine war and China's relations with Putin's Russia. Such policy divergences have occurred mainly between China strongman Xi Jinping and some foreign-policy ruling elites who are politically connected with the top leaders who ruled China prior to Xi's rise. As Xi steadily supports Putin with a strong commitment to the informal alliance between China and Russia, the dissenting voices among the policy elites have advocated distancing China from Russia's military venture in Ukraine. Meanwhile, criticisms of Xi's stance on the Ukraine war have also appeared in social media. Such criticisms highlight China's national interest, which is inherently more skeptical of Russia, rather than endorse a close partnership. This essay analyzes Xi's personal and political interests in maintaining a pro-Putin policy, the potential connection between the observed policy divergences and the elite power struggle ahead of China's 20th Party Congress, and Xi's attempts to turn his policy liability into an asset and thus gain leverage in the forthcoming CCP leadership reorganization.

China as a one-party state is usually seen by outsiders as a coherent actor in international politics, but a close examination of divergent elite views about the country's official responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine shows that such coherence does not exist. As in other countries, foreign policy in China is affected by domestic politics and vice versa. With the ruling CCP scheduled to reorganize its top leadership at its 20th National Party Congress in the fall of this year, divergences over this foreign-policy issue and the fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine could have a material impact on the outcome of the congress.

Since mid-March, some Chinese policy elites have begun to openly express dissenting views about the Ukraine war and to question China's close relations with Putin's Russia and its increasingly tense ties with the West. Such a policy divergence has occurred mainly between Chinese strongman Xi Jinping and some foreign-policy elites who are politically tied to the pre-Xi top leaders. As Xi maintains his support for Putin and persists with his informal alliance with Russia, recent dissenting voices call for distancing China from Russia's military venture in Ukraine. Meanwhile, criticisms of Xi's stance on the Ukraine war have also appeared in social media, highlighting China's national interest and its past victimization by Russia (and the Soviet Union). Disagreements over this critical foreign-policy issue will likely become heavily politicized and may even pose a challenge to Xi's plan for a third term as party chief.

It is reasonable to argue that the Ukraine war has disrupted Xi's 2022 political agenda and has forced the Chinese regime to confront the consequences of a potential geopolitical game-changer. The war has raised important questions about Chinese foreign policy and domestic politics. Will China's domestic power game ahead of the 20th Party Congress be affected by developments related to China's stance on the war? Why has Xi Jinping attached his political fortunes to Putin's military venture in Ukraine? What are the sources of discontent among some CCP elites about the war? How were they able to express their discontent with Xi despite the regime's tight control of the media and of discussions about sensitive political issues, and how might such voices influence China's policy making on Ukraine and the balance of power within the CCP? To address these questions, we first analyze Xi Jinping's political motivations for supporting Putin's military venture in Ukraine, and then we discuss the emergence of some recent dissenting voices among policy elites and in social media. Finally, we explore how such different policy attitudes toward the Ukraine war may affect China's leadership politics.

### **Comrade Dictators: Xi Jinping's Undeclared Alliance with Putin Based on His Personal Ambitions**

Immediately before Vladimir Putin ordered that his troops invade Ukraine on February 24, 2022, he took an extraordinary tour to Beijing on February 4. The ostensible purpose of his visit to China was to attend the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games. However, the official Chinese press billed the visit as an extraordinarily significant international event. It stressed the long personal relationship between Xi and Putin, highlighting the fact that Putin's visit to Beijing fell on the very first day of spring according to the Chinese lunar calendar and marking the start of the Year of the Tiger. Official media also underscored that the Xi-Putin summit was held despite the pandemic and that it was the 38th meeting between the two leaders since Xi became PRC president in 2013.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to calling attention to these facts, official Chinese media dwelt on some more weighty aspects of Sino-Russian relations, in particular China's extraordinarily close partnership with Russia in international politics, the two countries' close bilateral cooperation, and the significant role the two leaders play in their cooperation and partnership. While Putin was in Beijing, China and Russia signed fifteen agreements covering many important fields of cooperation and trade ties, ranging from natural gas, oil, and grain, to satellites, information technology, and data.<sup>2</sup> One of Xi's favorite protégés, director of the CCTV Group Shen Haixiong (慎海雄), who is among the youngest of China's ministers, published his interview with Putin, in which Putin highlighted his "regular and close communications" with Xi and repeated that "China is Russia's

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<sup>1</sup> 中国新闻网, "习近平与普京共赴冬奥之约, 中俄并肩'一起向未来,'" <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2022/02-03/9667970.shtml>, posted February 3, 2022; accessed May 10, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> 中华人民共和国外交部网站, "中俄签署一系列合作文件," [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202202/t20220204\\_10638957.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202202/t20220204_10638957.shtml), posted February 4, 2022; accessed May 10, 2022.

strategic partner on the international stage.”<sup>3</sup> The CCP propaganda machine boasted that China’s cooperation with Russia was “without limits,” and that the two countries were “shoulder to shoulder and back to back” connected “together in defending international fairness and justice.”<sup>4</sup>

Particularly noteworthy is that China’s military forces enthusiastically joined in the effusive praise of the Sino-Russian relationship and in the two leaders’ contribution to the relationship. A *Jiefangjun bao* (解放军报, *The PLA Daily*) piece reposted on the webpage of the PRC Ministry of National Defense prominently features an image of Xi and Putin standing together in Moscow’s Red Square as Russian jet fighters roared across the sky. The article concludes that the Sino-Russian relationship is in the best shape on record, and it has already become a great power relationship with the highest degree of mutual trust, cooperation and coordination, and strategic value; the key to such a relationship is the strategic leadership of the leaders of the two states.”<sup>5</sup>

Days later, following publication of the above-cited piece, Russian air force jets flew across the Ukrainian sky, marking the beginning of its disastrous invasion on February 24. On the following day, Xi phoned Putin to “exchange opinions concerning the current Ukrainian situation.”<sup>6</sup> The official readout of their conversation highlights Putin’s congratulations to Xi for the success of the Beijing Winter Olympics and Xi’s implicit endorsement of Putin’s actions in Ukraine.

It is no secret that for decades Beijing has taken care to cultivate its “comprehensive, strategic, and cooperative partnership” with Moscow. Furthermore, since taking power, Xi has never tried to hide his admiration of Putin. This exceptional closeness between the two leaders may be attributed to a number of factors, such as the collectivist mentality of those of Xi’s generation who grew up in the early days of the People’s Republic when the CCP regarded the Soviet Union as its big brother as well as Xi’s family background (his father was a veteran revolutionary when the CCP was supported and financed by the CPSU-led Comintern). Another key factor is Xi’s perception of Putin as a hero who was able to build a strongman-ruled regime in post-Soviet Russia. Pragmatic geopolitical considerations, however, are much more important than the

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<sup>3</sup> 新华网, “俄罗斯总统普京接受中央广播电视总台台长专访,” [http://www.news.cn/mrdx/2022-02/04/c\\_1310454579.htm](http://www.news.cn/mrdx/2022-02/04/c_1310454579.htm), posted February 4, 2022; accessed May 10, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> China Daily, “从冬奥之约到新春之会: 中俄元首会晤的三重意涵,” <https://china.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202202/06/WS61ff75fea3107be497a05421.html>, from Xinhua, posted February 6, 2022; accessed May 10, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> 中华人民共和国国防部网站, “习近平主席和普京总统将举行自 2013 年以来第 38 次会晤,” [http://www.mod.gov.cn/topnews/2022-02/02/content\\_4904160.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/topnews/2022-02/02/content_4904160.htm), from Xinhua and published in 解放军报 (PLA Daily), posted on February 2, 2022; accessed May 10, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> 中华人民共和国外交部网, “习近平同俄罗斯总统普京通电话,” [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202202/t20220225\\_10645684.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202202/t20220225_10645684.shtml), posted February 25, 2022; accessed May 10, 2022.

CCP's debt to the former Soviet Union or Xi's own appreciation of Putin's domestic policy and risk-taking international conduct.

Furthermore, Xi's embrace of Putin at this critical juncture can also be attributed to the following three factors. First, Xi regards Putin as a comrade, and even a model, in achieving his personal and political ambitions to remain in power as an unchallengeable leader. In this regard, Putin, of course, is Xi's big brother, as the former has already dominated Russian politics for more than twenty years and during his time at the apex of the Russian state, he has exercised firm control over the new Russian empire and earned himself the moniker "Putin the Great." Although Xi and Putin are a similar age (Putin was born in October 1952, and Xi was born in April 1953), Xi rose to power much later and he is still struggling to overcome the CCP's post-Mao norms and even elite resistance to win a third term as top leader. When he began his first term, Xi proposed the so-called "China Dream" to make China into a global superpower. His behavior during the past ten years indicates that his personal "China Dream" is perhaps to become "China's Putin," with at least quasi-life tenure.

Second, Xi embraces Putin as a comrade in the geopolitical and ideological struggle against the West. From the perspective of Chinese domestic politics, Putin's anti-Communist rhetoric does not seem to be a problem for Xi. In fact, previous Chinese Communist leaders, including Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao, also firmly embraced the post-Soviet Russian leaders, including Boris Yeltsin, despite any political and ideological divergences that might have existed between Beijing and Moscow. The initial motivations for the Chinese leaders to endorse the post-Soviet leaders mainly involved geopolitical considerations and international relations, such as Chinese fears of Western sanctions and even containment during the post-Tiananmen era. As the new Putin regime increasingly revealed its anti-democratic nature, it was only natural for Beijing to reunite with its former Cold War ally to confront the West by both resisting pressures for a democratic transition at home and balancing against the United States abroad. Since coming to power Xi has accelerated and deepened these domestic and foreign-policy trends to such a degree that China and Russia have become the two foremost and formidable challengers to democracy and the world order. In recent years, Xi's grand assessment has been that "the East is rising, while the West is declining" (东升西降). He sees the undeclared Sino-Russian alliance as the most significant strategic asset to reshape the international order, whereby the rise of the East will be part of a new world order.

Third, Putin's military venture in Ukraine can be an inspiration for Xi to achieve his own ambition of using force to take back Taiwan. This was particularly the case before the Russian troops met the brave and effective resistance of the Ukrainian army. In fact, Xi has repeatedly declared his plan to "completely unify the motherland," referring to a move that would make Taiwan a part of the People's Republic of China. He regards reunification as a necessary and crucial step to fulfill his political ambition of "bringing China back to the center of the world stage" and, therefore, his personal dream of making himself one of the greatest leaders in Chinese history.

Therefore, Xi's admiration for Putin and his anti-Western policies in both domestic and foreign affairs are closely connected with his ambition to be the great Maoist leader of China in the "new era." It may be said that Xi has drawn inspiration from Putin's ideological mindset, actions, and

accomplishments (until the latter's mishap in Ukraine) to replicate the Russian strongman's success in China and to remain firmly in power.

### **The National Interest vs. the Leader's Interest: Dissident Voices among Policy Elites and on Social Media**

Xi Jinping's personal interest, as embedded in his stance on the Ukraine war, is not identical to the organizational interests of the CCP, nor is it consistent with the national interest of China. But in a non-democratic political system that represses bottom-up expressions of group interests and social opinions, it is difficult to determine what the collective group interests are, let alone the collective interest of a huge political party like the CCP, which has 95 million members, or the collective interest of China as a nation. Being a dictator means that Xi is able to promote his personal interests, but it does not mean that he can entirely replace party or regime interests. Under certain circumstances, various social groups, especially the political elites, may have an opportunity to express opinions that are different from those of the dictator. The war in Ukraine, particularly the stalemate facing Putin's military, has seemingly provided an opportunity for some Chinese policy elites and social media to voice discontent.

Such dissident voices began to emerge concurrently with the emergence of the Ukrainian resistance as well as with the emergence of an increase in Western moral and material support to Ukraine, and especially Western economic and financial sanctions against Russia. On March 5, a party-state-affiliated expert on Sino-American relations, named Hu Wei (胡伟), criticized Xi's stance on the Russo-Ukraine war, urging that the Chinese regime should "accurately analyze and assess the direction of the war and its potential impact on the international landscape." He emphasized that "in order to strive for a relatively favorable external environment, China must respond flexibly and make strategic choices that conform with its long-term interests," and he openly suggested that "China cannot be tied to Putin and it must cut itself off [from Putin] as soon as possible."<sup>7</sup> On March 14, an essay with a similar argument and authored by Wang Huiyao (王辉耀) appeared on the Chinese webpage of the *New York Times*. It called for China to "offer the Russian leader an offramp" to end the military conflict in Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> Both pieces emphasize the possible negative outcomes of the war for Russia, predicting a new rise of the West with this significant geopolitical event and highlight how Russia's military failure and the Western responses to the war might have a disastrous effect on the Chinese regime.

Both authors have important positions within the Chinese regime and run prestigious think-tanks. Hu Wei is based at Shanghai Jiaotong University, a university well known in recent decades for its famous graduate, former CCP general secretary and PRC president Jiang Zemin. In publishing Hu's article, however, the website does not refer to his affiliation with the university;

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<sup>7</sup> On March 13, it was published on a U.S.-based bilingual website. See 胡伟, "俄乌战争的可能结果与中国的抉择," US-China Perception Monitor, <https://uscnpm.org/2022/03/17/e-wu-zhanzheng-de-keneng-jieguo-yu-zhongguo-de-jueze/>, accessed May 11, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> 王辉耀, "是时候让中国帮忙给普京一条退路了," 纽约时报中文网, <https://cn.nytimes.com/opinion/20220314/china-russia-ukraine/dual/>, posted March 14, 2022; accessed May 11, 2022.

instead, it refers to his affiliation with the State Council and with the Charhar Institute (察哈尔学会), the latter being widely regarded as a white-glove organization of the Ministry of State Security.<sup>9</sup> The *New York Times* introduces Wang Huiyao as director of the Beijing-based Center for Globalization and China, which “provides suggestions regarding globalization to the Chinese government.”

Furthermore, the website that published Hu’s article, US-China Perception Monitor (中美印象) is also a prestigious policy outlet. It is run by the Carter Center, established by former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, to promote U.S.-China relations, and it is under the leadership of Dr. Yawei Liu who is executive director and editor of the website.<sup>10</sup> Liu’s elder brother, Liu Yazhou (刘亚洲), is a PLA general and son-in-law of former PRC president Li Xiannian (李先念). It has been reported, however, that General Liu was detained and investigated in December 2021, probably on orders from Xi Jinping.<sup>11</sup>

On Chinese social media, similar voices have also appeared, but with even more blatant criticism of the government’s official stance on the Ukraine war and Sino-Russian relations, and with some even more radical suggestions raised by anonymous online commentators based on relatively unrealistic policy perspectives. For example, some such voices, based on the same rationale that Russia was using to justify its invasion of Ukraine, argued that while Russia is engaged in Ukraine, China should take the opportunity to send troops to the Siberian region of Russia to seize back those territories, historically part of imperial China, that were occupied by Tsarist Russia in the late nineteenth century. In particular, some Chinese internet users called for the restoration of China’s historical sovereignty over the sixty-four villages east of the Amur River (Heilong Jiang 黑龙江), known in Chinese as 江东六十四屯, where a group of Manchu, Daur, and Han-inhabited villages have been ruled by Russia. Some even pointed out that such a military action in the north would be more beneficial to China’s national interest than Xi’s southern target of Taiwan, as the Siberian region is large in area (it is said that in the region Tsarist Russia took territories of 1,540,000 square kilometer from China — that is roughly the size of Alaska, as, by contrast, Taiwan is 36,000 square kilometer) and rich in natural resources that China much needs.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For official information about the institute, see <http://www.charhar.org.cn>, accessed May 13, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> See the official webpage of the Center: <https://www.cartercenter.org>.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, <https://www.newsdirectory3.com/the-peoples-liberation-armys-pro-u-s-general-liu-yazhou-rumors-that-his-disappearance-is-suspected-of-intensifying-the-ccps-struggle-international-free-times-electronic-new/>, posted December 24, 2021; accessed May 13, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Those random comments with such opinions on social media I encountered with in the past months seem unavailable now, as they might be “harmonized” by the CCP’s internet censorship. But some more formal while implicit expressions of such opinions can be found online. See, for example, 马大正, “近代中国丧土失地的历史不应回避,” <https://m.aisixiang.com/data/133548.html>, posted and accessed May 12, 2022; 九三军事, “中国丢失的十大领土! 中华儿女千万别忘记!” 新浪网,

Meanwhile, some Chinese citizens residing overseas painted a picture of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict that is fundamentally different from that which is presented to people within the PRC. Among them, Wang Jixian (王吉贤), a Chinese citizen living in Odessa, Ukraine, and working as a computer engineer, became popular (with 110,000 followers, though it is unclear how many of them actually reside in the mainland)<sup>13</sup> due to his YouTube broadcasts about the war. Both Western and Chinese mainstream media began to notice this 37-year-old Beijinger, as a result of which the Chinese government banned his broadcasts within China.<sup>14</sup>

It is common knowledge that social media in China is closely monitored and controlled by the government. The presence of even slightly dissident voices is politically noteworthy. Of course, this could be the result of occasional lapses in government censorship, but it is also possible that those in charge of monitoring the internet intentionally allowed these dissident views to get through because of their own differences with mainstream opinions. In any case, a convergence between policy elites' criticism and social dissident voices regarding China's official stance on the Ukraine war seems occurring, and such consonances have increased pressures over the Xi leadership on adjusting its pro-Putin policy.

There is also the possibility, despite Xi's efforts to place his own people in positions of authority, that some of those controlling the internet, who came to power during the Jiang Zemin years, remain loyal to the former leader. In addition, many of those in positions of authority in the internet sector have international backgrounds in terms of their personal lives, education, training, and social networking, particularly with the United States. Like those Chinese policy elites mentioned above, they too benefit from China's deep global engagement. It would thus come as no surprise that at least some of them are unhappy with Xi's foreign-policy attempts to reduce China's ties with the West and they therefore are willing to permit such differences of opinion to circumvent the censorship controls.

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[https://k.sina.cn/article\\_6092007183\\_16b1ca70f019001by4.html](https://k.sina.cn/article_6092007183_16b1ca70f019001by4.html), posted and accessed May 14, 2022; 花灯读书, “乾隆时国土面积 1300 多万平方公里, 丢失的四分之一都到哪去了?” 网易, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/H7L39KK30552A5R0.html>, posted and accessed May 18, 2022, especially see the comments, one of which asks: “Is there still somebody who likes to take a wrong daddy?” as referring to that Xi Jinping and the CCP take Russia/the Soviet Union as their political “daddy.” Also, a piece in a pro-CCP overseas Chinese-language website cites such a point of view, as condemning it, that China should take the opportunity to get back the territories from Russia. See 軒轅伊尹, “北方俄占領土, 中俄這樣解決,” 留园网, <https://club.6parkbbs.com/nz/index.php?app=forum&act=threadview&tid=953550>, posted and accessed May 14, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> For Wang's YouTube channel, see [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAtIuFy5UAU96ywetJk\\_QaA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAtIuFy5UAU96ywetJk_QaA), accessed May 13, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, the relevant Radio Free Asia report, at <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/zhuanelan/wangluoboyi/iwar-04202022163626.html>, accessed May 13, 2022.

## A Two-Level Game of Public Opinion: The Impact of Events in Ukraine on Xi and the 20th Party Congress

For whatever reasons the dissident voices are able to be uttered by some elites and on social media, the mounting public-opinion pressures on Xi Jinping do point at questioning, ultimately, his plan of taking a third term in office at the 20th Party Congress. It might be unwise to exaggerate the policy impacts of these differences of opinion, but it does help to highlight a political dilemma that Xi certainly faces. Because Putin's future in Ukraine is uncertain, Xi will be taking a risk if he remains too closely allied with Russia. But if he retreats from his alliance with Putin, his authority within the CCP would be challenged and his domination of the leadership reorganization at the forthcoming party congress might be seriously undermined—such that even his third term in office is called into question. Either way, the political aftermath of Putin's military action will cast a dark shadow on Xi's future.

Moreover, Xi also faces other serious challenges in domestic affairs. As this author observed several months ago, there has been a new tide of CCP elite resistance to Xi since the winter of 2021.<sup>15</sup> Three major areas of policy disputes have apparently emerged, suggesting a power struggle that seems to have put Xi on the defensive. The Ukraine policy is one of such policy areas. Aside from it, China's strategy on Covid-19 is constantly testing Xi's leadership skills. The lockdown in Shanghai has turned into a series of humanitarian disasters, having some political ramifications that may damage Xi's authority and upset his personnel plan for the 20th Party Congress. Equally challenging is China's economic slowdown that has occurred primarily due to Xi's harsh pandemic policy and his anti-market economic measures. All of these add new momentum to the power struggle within the CCP, with the potential of Xi's predominance in the power redistribution being substantially reduced, if not fatally undermined.

Policy disputes aside, it seems that since March Xi has wobbly attempted some Janus-faced but superficial adjustments of his policy on the Ukraine war. There have been some contradictory statements by PRC diplomats and official organs, indicating that China might soften its policy position and move away from its position of supporting Russia “with no limits,” while still continuing to blame the U.S. and NATO for their eastward expansion “threat” to Russia. At the same time, Xi has recently also lowered his profile and has remained silent about the rise of the East and the decline of the West, and he has now rarely openly boasted about his friendship with Putin.

Such adjustments, of course, can be viewed as a policy failure on Xi's part in the face of internal resistance and external pressures. However, they may also be seen as part of Xi's updated strategy to overcome resistance and to defend his core political interests. The final arbiters will be whether Xi retreats from his ambition for quasi-life tenure and whether the Chinese regime abandons its anti-West attitude in international relations. To this observer, both these possibilities are highly unlikely.

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<sup>15</sup> Guoguang Wu, “Politics and Norms in Leadership Reorganization toward the 20th Party Congress: Preliminary Observations,” *China Leadership Monitor*, issue 71 (March 1, 2022), <https://www.prclleader.org/wu-2>, accessed May 13, 2022.

The core of China's current Ukraine strategy is to make superficial changes in terms of its international stance, while not altering its essential tilt toward Putin and Russia. In this context, it is interesting that so far, Xi and his regime have not imposed harsh punishments on such elite dissident opinions; mild censorship has simply blocked the flow of such criticism from overseas outlets to China's domestic audiences. Based on these signs, it is too premature to conclude that Xi has lost control over the CCP propaganda machine. A more reasonable interpretation is that Xi's team might have, early on, intentionally given a possible greenlight to some of the dissident ideas, especially those appearing in overseas outlets, while blocking their flow into China and censoring social criticism at the same time. The purpose of doing so might be to fool Western politicians and influence global public opinion so that China might not be seen as an enemy like Putin's Russia. If such a ploy works and international pressures wane and if China is given a significant role in mediating between Russia and Ukraine, the credit will go primarily to Xi himself. Should such developments occur in the months leading up to the party congress in the fall, Xi likely will be able to turn around the current pressures and maintain his dominance at the 20th Party Congress.

In the Chinese "war" on public opinion about the Ukraine war, therefore, a two-level game of manipulation seems to be emerging: some global-minded elites are playing on dissident opinions against Xi's pro-Putin policy and his ambitious power plan for the 20th Party Congress, while Xi and his supporters are playing on the expression of such opinions against international pressures on Beijing to defend Xi's ambitions at the congress.

This explains why those regime-affiliated outspoken experts have not been punished or even silenced for their criticism of Xi's stance on the Ukraine war. Instead, more elite dissident voices continue to appear lately, as in the cases of Yan Xuetong's (阎学通) article in *Foreign Affairs* and former Chinese ambassador to Ukraine Gao Yusheng's (高玉生) public comments on Putin's failure in Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> The expression of these opinions is not necessarily organized by the regime or by a faction within the regime, but, with their control of the coercive means and the technological tools, it would not be difficult for Xi and his regime to crack down on such dissenting voices. There are mild measures against the expression of such opinions, as in the case of pulling off Gao's comments from websites, but the virtual absence of a crackdown and punishments reveals the sophistication of China's utilization of international soft power.

In this seemingly smart game, a danger for Xi still exists, which is the possibility of out-of-control of criticism. Timing is a critical factor at play here. In the few months before the party congress, likely in October or November this year,<sup>17</sup> a lot can happen. An early, strategic retreat

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<sup>16</sup> Yan Xuetong, "China's Ukraine Conundrum: Why the War Necessitates a Balancing Act," *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-05-02/chinas-ukraine-conundrum>, posted and accessed May 2, 2022; Go Yusheng's comment already disappeared in China's internet, but for the content of his comment and the banning of it, see, for example, RFA, "反主旋律, 前外交官看衰普京报导遭删除," <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/Xinwen/7-05102022151615.html>, posted and accessed May 10, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Even though the CCP has not officially announced when the Congress will take place, it has referred to it being held in the "latter half of 2022." See "中国发布: 中国共产党第二十次全国

might buy back time for Xi's leadership reorganization, but the unpredictability of the war in Ukraine may present even greater challenges to Xi, particularly if Putin's political survival becomes endangered as his battlefield losses mount and popular opposition grows.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Every regime faces internal frictions, even the most centralized dictatorships, and even in foreign policy that is one of the most centralized areas of policy and governance. This is especially the case in China where Zhou Enlai, the major architect of CCP diplomacy, established the principle that “nothing is trivial in diplomacy” (外交无小事). This principle has been handed down in China from generation to generation. Any dispute, however trivial, may have profound implications on both foreign relations and, more importantly, on domestic politics. Xi Jinping's “no-limit” support for Putin is not a trivial matter, especially because Putin has invaded Ukraine and caused the worst international crisis since the end of the Cold War.

As the Russian military venture faced international condemnation and even sanctions, and as its military actions reached a stalemate, Xi began to face criticism from among CCP elites. This is mainly because, in order to serve his own political ambitions and personal interests, Xi's Russian/Ukrainian policies are damaging the long-term interests of the regime, i.e., to maintain a monopoly of power through economic development and global engagement. The leadership reorganization ahead of the forthcoming 20th Party Congress likely further intensifies such differences of opinion within the CCP regarding China's stance on the Ukraine war, thus adding momentum to the struggle for power and especially to the elite resistance to Xi's neo-Maoist political ambitions and governance programs.

In light of the party principle that “nothing is trivial in diplomacy,” criticism over such a significant foreign policy issue has the potential to become a serious matter for the Chinese regime, especially when it has ramifications that challenge the authority, power, and even the position of the party chief. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that Xi Jinping doesn't well understand the significant implications of such criticism to his position, especially during this politically sensitive time period ahead to the 20th Party Congress. Are both Xi Jinping and the CCP elites playing a two-level game of public opinion to reduce the international pressures that Xi and the CCP regime are facing? Will Xi be undermined by such intra-elite differences regarding policy on Ukraine, or will he be able to overcome this elite resistance and even to make use of such differences to achieve his power goals? Events in the months that follow will be highly dynamic but they will have extremely low predictability. Regardless, this essay would highlight two concluding remarks drawn from the above analysis: first, Xi Jinping is under the pressure that comes mainly from CCP elites over his personal ambition of staying in power beyond the two-term limit, and his unpopular policies, including his “no-limit” stance of supporting Putin, have also become arenas of power struggle against his ambition; second, given the essence of CCP neo-totalitarian politics, even elite resistance and policy divergences can be manipulated to benefit the dictator. Analysts must refrain from reaching sweeping conclusions at this stage.

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代表大会 2022 年下半年召开,” 中国网, [http://news.china.com.cn/2021-11/11/content\\_77866842.html](http://news.china.com.cn/2021-11/11/content_77866842.html), accessed May 13, 2022.

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