

The Sydney Morning Herald. – 22.03.2023

Mick Ryan

Why Xi wants the West to watch Russia rather than China

Чому Сі Ц. хоче, щоб Захід дивився на росію, а не на Китаї

У статті йдеться про нещодавній візит голови КНР Сі Ц. до Москви та його значення в контексті російсько-українського конфлікту. Автор статті, австралійський військовий експерт М. Раян зазначає, що цей візит є заявою про підтримку російсько-китайської версії «міжнародного порядку» та бажаним відволіканням уваги від посередніх результатів Росії в її наступі на сході України у 2023 р. У статті припускається, що путін сподіватиметься добитися певної форми військової допомоги від Китаю, оскільки ситуація на полі бою для росії скоро погіршиться, оскільки Україна, ймовірно, почне свої наступальні дії в найближчі кілька місяців. Автор припускає, що Китай міг би розширити обмін розвідданими, надати технології подвійного призначення, взяти на себе зобов'язання купувати більше російського експорту нафти та газу та продовжувати підтримувати російські інформаційні операції. Стаття завершується підкресленням важливості питань безпеки в Європі та Азії, які нерозривно пов'язані між Сі Ц. і путіним, і виступає за збільшення допомоги Україні, щоб допомогти їй виграти війну.

<https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/why-xi-wants-the-west-to-watch-russia-rather-than-china-20230321-p5ctx7.html>

This week, during my visit to Ukraine, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Moscow. Coming on the heels of Russian President Vladimir Putin's International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant, and his midnight visit to Russian-occupied Mariupol, it was a statement of support for a Russo-Chinese version of "the international order".

Russia is desperate for such shows of support – as well as an economic lifeline. Its invasion of Ukraine has become a morass for the Russians. They have very little to show for the continuous flow of coffins back to Russia. They are running short on munitions and armoured vehicles. Economic sanctions are hurting Russian manufacturing of high-tech items, especially weapons. So the Chinese president's journey of friendship and support comes at a good time for Putin.

It is also a welcome distraction from Russia's mediocre performance in its 2023 offensive in eastern Ukraine. Begun in January, and featuring Russian attacks at Kreminna, Bakhmut, Vuhledar and elsewhere, the Russians have expended massive resources for very little territorial gain so far. It could be that the Russian operations since January are a preliminary series of actions, with a campaign of larger scope to be launched after the Ukrainian so-called mud season. But you are more likely to win a wager on the Redcliffe Dolphins claiming the 2023 NRL premiership than betting on Russian large-scale battlefield success.

Therefore, Putin will be hoping to wrangle some form of military assistance from China because, as bad as the battlefield situation is for Russia now, it is about to get worse. Ukraine, which has long telegraphed its 2023 offensives, is likely to launch these attacks in the next few months. The Ukrainians, who will be fighting with first-rate Western tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery and support, will pose a massive challenge to Russia's hold on its occupied territory. As the Ukrainians have shown at Kyiv, Kherson and Kharkiv, they – unlike the Russians – know how to plan and conduct successful large-scale offensives.

Xi, who is canny enough to recognise his strong hand, is unlikely to want to further antagonise the Americans or risk economic sanctions that would imperil his already low 5 per cent growth projections. But, he also needs the war to continue for the time being so that Russia has some chance of achieving its goals and so the US and Europe remain fixated on European security challenges. The longer they remain distracted, the more time Xi has to achieve his strategic designs for the western Pacific with minimal US interference.

How might Xi achieve this balancing act?

First, it is likely the two countries could expand intelligence sharing. This is an inevitable part of such co-operation between nations. While it is probable that China is already sharing information

with Russia about decision-making in Washington DC and European capitals, it could expand such collaboration.

Second, China might provide dual-use technologies that could be employed in either civil industry or the production of Russian defence material. Chinese exports to Russia have surged this year, and the provision of dual-use technologies would be more difficult for the US and Europe to counter than direct military assistance like munitions.

Third, Xi might commit to purchasing more Russian exports of oil and gas. In 2022, China increased LPG imports from Russia by 100 per cent and oil imports by 10 per cent. Xi might further increase Russian imports to bolster Russia's economy – and its war-making potential.

Finally, China is likely to continue – if not expand – its support for Russian information operations. The Chinese Communist Party has been an enthusiastic amplifier of Russian narratives since the start of the war. This is assisting Russian diplomacy in Africa and South Asia. But such Chinese amplification also assists Chinese narratives for challenging the global order they believe is dominated by the United States and Europe.

The Ukrainian long-range strike against a train apparently carrying Russian missiles during Xi's visit is an acute embarrassment for Putin. The Ukrainians have demonstrated – again – they can strike the Russians where and when they wish. However, it is unlikely that Putin will use this in his pleas to Xi for more missiles and other munitions. Both leaders will declare the Moscow summit a success regardless of any realities on the ground in Ukraine.

There are two final things that might be taken from the Moscow authoritarian mutual-admiration meeting.

First, Xi and Putin have embraced each other. Even though he stands next to an accused war criminal who has personally overseen the largest war and the worst war crimes in decades, Xi has shown that his dislike of Western ideals – and Western cohesion over Ukraine – exceeds any distaste for Putin's actions. And he needs Putin to remain where he is as a fellow traveller. If Putin were to lose power, there is a strong possibility of an unstable Russia. Instability in his northern neighbour – and largest fellow authoritarian regime – is something that Xi will want to avoid if at all possible.

Finally, this convergence of Russian and Chinese interests shows that European and Asian security issues are indelibly linked by the Xi and Putin entente cordiale. They have pledged to jointly guard the international order, or at least their version of it. What happens in Europe has implications for our region. It is all the more reason why Australia should provide more assistance to Ukraine to help them win this war.