



By: The Editorial Board

A private meeting in Moscow, for diplomatic purposes



Top Chinese diplomat Wang Yi visited Moscow and met Vladimir Putin two days before the anniversary of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

It was a symbolic gesture of friendship, which the Kremlin desperately needed, after it suffered a heavy blow from US President Joe Biden's visit to Kyiv.

In addition to symbolism, the details of the upcoming visit of the Chinese leader Xi Jinping to Putin was certainly on Yi's agenda.

President Xi came to Moscow much earlier than unofficially expected, as there were hints that the visit would take place in a few months, or by the end of this year.

But the visit happened earlier, and was timed to display strong symbolism.

Diplomatic cover

The Chinese leader visited Putin just days after the International Criminal Court's indictment and the issue of an international arrest warrant.

For Putin, Xi's arrival was an important relief in his first days under the burden of an international war crimes indictment.

As for China, with the arrival of its leader in Moscow, it was a clearly demonstration that it pays no heed to the decisions of the ICC, and that it does not recognise the Rome Statute.

"China feels no responsibility to hold the Kremlin accountable for the atrocities committed in Ukraine, and instead of even condemning them, it would rather provide diplomatic cover for Russia to continue to commit those very crimes", US State Secretary Antony Blinken said on Monday.

For Putin, the Chinese "diplomatic cover" is an important result of Xi's visit, because it sends a rather strong global message to all nations that follow Beijing's moves how to behave in the event that they have any dilemma over

whether to respect the orders of the ICC or the political conjuncture.

After the meeting between the two leaders, there was not much publicly available material that would be useful for evaluating the future relations between their countries, particularly their possible joint actions on the international stage.

Support me, and I'll support you

Even after the two-day talks in Moscow (why two meetings?), their autocratic structures did not allow anything other than phrases to be released to the public, which is characteristic of decades-long autocracies in both countries.

The joint statement of the two presidents, released at the end of the visit, was a balanced list of mutual support for every open national issue.

Putin confirmed that he considers Taiwan part of China, and supported Xi's Global Development Initiative, a new Chinese connectivity programme that should replace the faltering Belt and Road Initiative in a less detailed and more "green" way.

Russia needed, and received, a joint warning to NATO to abide by its commitments as a regional and defensive organisation, and to treat peaceful development of other countries in an objective and fair manner.

Beijing needed and received a joint invitation for AUKUS members (Australia, the UK, the US) to strictly fulfil their obligations of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, and safeguard regional peace, stability and development.

The joint statement of Putin and Xi was full of concern and commitment to solving many world problems. From the Japanese nuclear programme, then meeting the "legitimate and reasonable concerns of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea", to the investigation into the destruction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline.

This choice of topics should prove that both countries have the capacity to influence global processes and that they are actually global powers. Are they?

The elephant in the room

While declaratively dealing with global crises, Putin and Xi had an elephant in the room: the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which, however, was not mentioned in the joint statement.

Unless Ukraine can be reduced to the extremely cynical formulation that “different countries have different histories, cultures and national conditions, and they all have the right to choose their own development path”.

Ukraine was a topic of conversation between the two, through the prism of the so-called Chinese peace plan, published on the anniversary of Russian aggression.

Putin, in general, supported this document in front of Xi as a good basis for the peace process, just as the Beijing document itself is general.

It was also clear that Putin would like to see Xi and his administration as a potential mediator in the peace process regarding Ukraine, because the Chinese platform is an echo of his vision of getting out of the war he started.

On the other hand, Beijing also wants to establish itself as a global peacemaker, on the wave of the thawing of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, in which it recently has also mediated.

Putin's "grabbing" China's peace option as the most favourable one raises Beijing's ambitions to continue with its increased international engagement.

Resource colony

The economic effects of Xi's visit to Putin

would not change the trends that were clear even before their meeting, and in the long term. extremely favourable for China and unfavourable for Russia.

Bilateral trade between China and Russia increased in the last war year by as much as 30%, and has reached almost 200 billion USD. This has been the result of the closure of the largest market for Russian gas and oil in Europe and the urgent reorientation towards China, which uses Russia's isolation to buy energy products at a huge discount.

On the other hand, sanctions against Russia leave China as its only source for imports of technical devices, semiconductors and other equipment, which has also raised bilateral trade.

“He (Putin) leads Russia into a resource colony of China. Because we are cut off from the West, from Europe, our main trade partner. He is leading a country into a commodity dependence on China. The Chinese only need three things from us. First oil and gas, and raw materials in general. Second territories and third weapons.”

This is not a comment about Xi's visit to Putin, but the words of Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov from 2014, when the West imposed the first sanctions against Moscow over the annexation of Crimea. A year before Nemtsov was assassinated in the centre of Moscow.

Who will China be loyal to?

The meeting between Xi and Putin in Moscow was, above all, a private and not a state meeting.

It was a meeting of two close autocrats who share a very similar personal and political background, and even more so, world views.

No one in Russia knows what Putin signed and promised to Xi. It might well be that Putin promised China a lot more, but the public was not made aware of it.

Putin has been offering various concessions to China because he wanted to buy China's loyalty.

Most of the people in the Kremlin don't want to be like China. They were using China as a bargaining instrument against America, but deep inside, they never wanted to be too close to China.

This is precisely why the money and the families of Russian ruling class were in Europe and America, but were never in China.

Therefore, it is possible that Putin viewed the visit of his Chinese friend as an important moment to save himself from scenarios in which he would be personally threatened.

However, Russian ruling and political class definitely has another plan. They know well that Xi Jinping doesn't need them. Even if he is willing to shield Putin and to provide him political asylum, most of Putin's oligarchs would not be welcomed in China.