

## **Xi misreads Putin's Ukraine gambit despite access to U.S. intel**

**Tacit support for Russian invasion could damage Beijing's global ambitions**

**HIROYUKI AKITA, Nikkei commentator**

TOKYO -- The war in Ukraine is entering a crucial stage as Russian forces surround Kyiv, the nation's capital. Countries in the West are now threatened with collateral damage to diplomacy and security for their failure to prevent Russia's reckless attack.

But China, which has strengthened ties with Russia and boasted about their quasi-alliance, will not escape fallout from the war. Eventually, Chinese President Xi Jinping will suffer from his decision to align closely with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Since Russian troops began massing on the Ukraine border last autumn, Chinese leaders continued to misinterpret Putin's intentions and had likely concluded that Russia would not stage an all-out war.

On Feb. 4, Xi invited Putin to Beijing and signed a joint statement declaring that friendship between the two countries has "no borders," and "there are no forbidden zones in cooperation." The two countries also voiced opposition to the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization while China clearly noted its support for Russia's stance on security.

Xi likely would have not reinforced ties with Russia to such a degree had he known that Russia would invade Ukraine three weeks later and be vilified worldwide. Many China watchers note that Xi failed to recognize the risk from Russia's move until it was too late.

There are reasons to believe China misinterpreted Putin's intent. Over the preceding three months, the U.S. contacted China six times and shared classified information about Russia's preparations for its Ukraine incursion, according to The New York Times. The U.S. took this unusual step hoping that China might be able to persuade Russia not to invade.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken shared intelligence with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi twice earlier this year. But China did not take the intel seriously, possibly believing Russia would dare not mount such a massive attack.

China's doubts were evidenced by the country's hasty evacuation of its nationals from Ukraine after the invasion started. With an estimated 6,000 Chinese in Ukraine, China only announced evacuation flights on Feb. 25, the day after the invasion began.

China may have misread Putin because of its desire to maintain solidarity with Russia in the face of recent U.S. challenges. In short, Beijing likely failed to assess objectively the Russian leader and his ambitions.

Another reason could be that Xi has consolidated power to such an extent that his cohorts feared being the bearers of bad news. "Aides to Xi are reluctant to bring information and analyses contrary to his policy for fear of putting him in a bad mood," said a diplomatic source

familiar with China. Information from the U.S. on Russia's possible invasion was an example of this.

Beijing's comments on the Russian invasion also lack consistency, reflecting its misreading of Putin.

During the Munich Security Conference held via video link on Feb. 19, Foreign Minister Wang said, "The sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of any country should be respected and safeguarded," adding that "Ukraine is no exception."

On Feb. 24 when the invasion started, China changed its stance and defended Russia's position. During the day's news conference, Hua Chunying, spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, refused to admit that Russia had undertaken an "invasion" when asked by reporters. She then blamed the U.S. as partly responsible for the Ukrainian situation, saying that Washington had deliberately fostered discord and raised the risk of war.

Within the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden there is disappointment with China and a growing backlash.

"Although there was slim hope in the Biden administration of persuading Beijing to discourage Putin from using force against Ukraine, there were few other options. So U.S. officials tried, even sharing sensitive intelligence with China," said Bonnie Glaser, an expert on China at the German Marshall Fund of the U.S.

"However, the Chinese interpreted this as an effort to drive a wedge and shared the information with the Russians. Then, when the Russians attacked, China's government refused to call it an 'invasion,' expressed sympathy with Russia, and pinned the blame on the United States. There is growing pessimism about the potential for cooperation with China on the crisis, and expectation that ties between China and Russia will be further deepened," she said.

China is being forced to revise its stance in the face of rising casualties in Ukraine. During a Feb. 25 telephone conversation with Putin, Xi reportedly asked the president to negotiate a settlement to the war and respect Ukraine's sovereignty.

The world now waits to see how much China can restrain Russia and contribute to a fair cease-fire. Standing too close to Russia during this important time could likely see its own global interests take a major hit for two reasons.

First, China's goal to supplant the U.S. as the world's leader by 2050 will have to be postponed indefinitely. China has been chafing under the constraints of the U.S.-led world order and has continuously stressed the principles of noninterference in the internal affairs of other nations and supported respect for sovereignty. Russia has trashed these principles by invading Ukraine. Hence, China can hardly expect to win the world's trust if it continues to remain aloof regarding Russia's military adventure.

Second, China could also find itself subject to guilt by association as regards its close Russia ties. Protests against the invasion are gathering steam -- both outside and inside Russia. If ordinary Russians feel antagonized by China, the two countries' long-term friendship could suffer.

Russia is an important source of energy and advanced military technology for China, as well as being a useful partner in checking U.S. ambitions. Now that Putin has become an invader,

however, China should conclude that its relationship with him might be more a burden than a benefit.