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Challenges Facing China after the Ukraine War and Its Responses

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Challenges Facing China with the Protracted Ukraine War

China considers Russia an important partner to establish a multipolar international order and the two sides announced a “no limits partnership” on February 4, 2022. China has tacitly supported Russia diplomatically and economically even after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. However, as the Ukraine war has become protracted, China is now confronted with a number of challenges.

1. Strengthening Western Countries' Coalition against Authoritarian States

The United States and Western countries have recovered and reinforced their cooperative relations rapidly against a common enemy, Russia. In addition, Russia's invasion of Ukraine justified the United States' warning against the perils of authoritarian countries. Such strengthening of the Western countries' coalition implies that the United States and Western countries are likely to intensify containment and pressure on China.

2. Need for New Momentum for Cooperation with European Countries

In its efforts to advance the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China sought to cooperate with European countries, emphasizing infrastructure development and economic exchanges. However, China's tacit support for Russia after the Ukraine war has spread distrust of China in Europe, undermining cooperative relationships between China and European countries. Against the backdrop of widening security concerns over Russia's invasion among Eastern European and Baltic countries, China needs to find new momentum to maintain cooperation and rebuild trust while balancing U.S. influence.

3. Tarnished National Image as a Responsible Power

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, China is likely to be perceived as a potential disruptor of the international order or a revisionist power given its close partnership with Moscow. Furthermore, China's passive response to the Ukraine war has damaged its national image as a responsible power amidst the international society’s expectation for China to take responsibility and play a positive role.

4. Economic Pressure by Expanded Economic Sanctions against Russia

As the United States has endeavored to exclude China from global supply chains and pursue decoupling with China in certain fields such as technology, pressure on China’s economy is growing. Even though

China ended its 'Zero COVID policy' to revive its economy and expand economic cooperation with other countries, secondary boycotts by the United States and Western countries can have a severe impact on China's economy.

5. Linkage between the Ukraine War and the Taiwan Issue

The Ukraine war has raised international concerns about China's potential aggression over Taiwan. In addition, Taiwan has increased its diplomatic space in the international society. This can impose political pressure on the Xi Jinping government which aims to isolate Taiwan to achieve 'One China.'

China's Responses and Its Implications

With the protracted nature of the Ukraine war, China's close relationship with Russia has raised distrust of China and negatively impacted its status and influence. In this situation, China has responded as follows.

1. Political Support and Limited Economic Assistance for Russia to Avoid Western Countries' Pressure

Despite the ongoing Ukraine war, China continues to emphasize cooperation and development in China-Russia relations. However, unlike its diplomatic rhetoric, China has been very cautious in actually supporting Russia. Such behavior reflects its intention to maintain a cooperative relationship with Russia while avoiding scrutiny and pressure from Western countries. In other words, although China's support for Russia cannot satisfy Russia given the economic sanctions on it, Russia cannot help but maintain favorable relations with China, highly appreciating China's 'balanced position.' At the same time, China's calculated approach prevents the United States and Western countries from finding legitimate grounds to impose actual sanctions on China, while warning of significant sanctions on China's support for Russia. China's stance toward Russia seems to contribute to enhancing its value in the international society by maintaining its influence over Russia.

2. Highlighting Differentiation from Russia by Opposing Russia's Use of Nuclear Weapons

Since President Vladimir Putin announced a partial military mobilization and appeared to threaten nuclear retaliation in September 2022, China has opposed Russia's potential use of nuclear weapons. Considering its attitude toward the North Korean nuclear issue, this stance raises questions about China's sincerity. However, this seemingly contradictory position seems to be highly calculated. That is, China is trying to refrain from intervening in the nuclear threats posed by its own partners, while positioning itself as a defender of the international order.

3. Presenting Itself as a Peace Mediator to Improve Its National Image

On February 24, the first anniversary of the Ukraine war, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis." Based on this, President Xi Jinping, presented China as a peace mediator by emphasizing the peaceful resolution of the Ukraine war during his visit to Russia and expressing interest in meeting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. China's mediation plan, however, is hard to evaluate as a genuine commitment to peaceful mediation between Russia and Ukraine because it lacks concrete plans and demands of the warring parties, such

as Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine. Given China's claim that the United States "fuels the fire" in Ukraine by supplying weapons to Ukraine, the fact that China presented itself as a mediator seems to be an attempt to portray itself as a responsible power, showcase its diplomatic influence and avoid diplomatic isolation in the international society, regardless of the success of its mediation efforts.

Future Outlook

Considering China's strategic goal of pursuing a multipolar international order, it is too early to conclude that China is unlikely to provide economic and military support to Russia in the Ukraine war. Russia remains an indispensable partner for China. In that sense, China would not want the war to end with Russia's defeat, as that would yield little benefits for China. The United States is likely to promote it as a victory for the liberal international order and intensify containment and pressure on China with the support of Western countries.

Given China's mediation plan, which calls for a ceasefire through dialogue and negotiation without Russian troop's withdrawal from occupied areas of Ukraine, at least China seems to want the war to reach a conclusion in the current situation. Although it may not result in a complete victory for Russia, this can highlight the limitation of the U.S.-led international order and provide a basis for China to expand its influence based on its diplomatic and economic power during the mediation and post-war reconstruction process. If Russia faces the situation in which it has to withdraw from the occupied areas due to United States and Western countries' support for Ukraine, China may intervene in the war by indirectly providing weapons or expanding economic exchanges with Russia.

Policy Proposals for South Korea

Given China's perception and policies regarding the Ukraine war as above, the South Korean government should consider the following points.

Firstly, South Korea needs to induce China's responsibility and involvement in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue by supporting China's position to oppose Russia's use of nuclear weapons and linking it to the North Korean nuclear issue. Whenever Russia makes statements or movements related to the use of nuclear weapons, China is likely to express opposition to it. The South Korean government should support China's stance and demand China take a similar stance to the North Korean nuclear issue.

Secondly, South Korea needs to prepare for potential disagreements with China regarding South Korea's support for Ukraine. Considering that China has criticized the United States and Western countries' support for Ukraine, China may condemn any South Korean moves to provide military support to Ukraine for exacerbating the war under U.S. pressure. Therefore, the South Korean government should emphasize its humanitarian support for Ukraine, point out the illegality of Russia's invasion, and assert its role as a responsible member of the international community in order to secure its diplomatic cause.

Thirdly, South Korea needs to recognize the potential military pressure from China and Russia and devise countermeasures. Against the strengthening South Korea-U.S.-Japan security cooperation, China

and Russia are likely to put joint pressure on South Korea by joint military exercises particularly in the waters surrounding the Korean Peninsula, including the South China Sea and the West Sea. Therefore, the South Korean government should not only enhance its naval capabilities, but also discuss countermeasures with the United States and Japan.

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