

With allies like these...

Kristian L. Nielsen

China is paying a price for standing by its only significant ally, Russia, whose adventures increasingly trap China too. History rhymes, but hopefully nothing more than that.



Credit: Wikipedia



Credit: PRC MFA

Introduction

Within the last few weeks, President Xi Jinping has with both Sergei Lavrov of Russia and Anthony Blinken of the US, the two countries' foreign ministers. While the former meeting celebrated [ever-closer relations](#) and [partnership](#), the latter was tenser. Blinken explicitly [warned China](#) over its continued support for Russia's war in Ukraine, being told in return to not cross [China's red lines](#). This followed another recent statement by US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen that the US would place [sanctions on Chinese companies](#) aiding Russian aggression. China facing simultaneous calls for greater support for its largest ally, and pressure to scale such support down, presents a tempting historical analogy.

As China's rise became apparent in the early 21st century, and the growth in its power inspired alarm in Washington, many pundits [likened it](#) to the rising [German Empire](#) in the [early 20th century](#), with the US replacing the United Kingdom as the rising power's foil. Now

naturally analogies should never be taken too far; similarities between Imperial Germany and present-day China are matched by an equal number of [dissimilarities](#). Mark Twain is often credited with the aphorism that “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes”. Indeed, history never does more than that, although that can be serious enough. Analogies are a fun parlour game, though, and do occasionally put the present in perspective.

The historical parallel

Like China today, Germany had gained power, both economically and militarily. However, it had also alienated most of its neighbours through its own belligerence. Germany was led by Kaiser Wilhelm II, a man both immature and insecure, who compensated by posturing, and who was always reluctant to take advice. China is led by Xi Jinping, who has secured lifetime tenure, likes to [flaunt his power](#), and who has [utterly discouraged](#) all dissenting views within in circles of power. Germany sought an overseas empire and its ‘place in the sun’, as they called it; China has made sweeping claims in the South China Sea and elsewhere.

Already 1894, Germany had pushed France and Russia into each other’s arms; by 1907, the UK had followed and the Triple Entente was a reality. Several of China’s neighbours by sea have more or less formal alliances with the US as insurance against aggression; in 2021, the AUKUS partnership was launched and has since become more ambitious. So far, so good with the historical parallel.

Less discussed are the rising powers’ allies. Imperial Germany’s only real ally was the, by 1900, increasingly decrepit Austro-Hungarian Empire. Weakened by internal dysfunction and restive national minorities, yet retaining imperial ambition in the Balkans, the dual monarchy leaned on Germany for support as conflict with Russia was becoming ever more likely. Germany’s decision to offer unconditional support to Austria-Hungary’s war with Serbia in 1914 set the stage for the First World War. China has Russia, a state in [long-term decline](#), yet retaining the capacity for armed aggression. China promised Russia “friendship with no limits” just before that country launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Thus, China finds itself propping up a declining power as it fights a desperate war to retain its influence over its former imperial subjects. History rhymes.

When the tail wags the dog

Russia matters to China as an economic partner, in that China imports large quantities oil, gas and other raw materials. This relationship has been immensely [beneficial for China](#) (much more so than for Russia). Russia matters as a political partner too, in as much as it helps China's quest to destabilize the West and recast global governance. For these reasons, China has done much to [ameliorate the effect](#) of Western sanctions on Russia. It has increased its bilateral trade significantly, mostly in dual-use technologies, allowing Russian armaments production to continue. Using [North Korea](#) as a proxy, it has also encouraged supplying Russia with both artillery and missile munitions. For China, there can be [no question](#) of letting Russia fall apart completely. They are too closely tied to one another.

However, China's interest in the Ukraine war is limited, to say the least. Ukraine used to be a major trading partner too, not least in food products. Had Russia succeeded in subduing Ukraine within three weeks, as they boldly predicted in February 2022, fine. However, the war dragging on in its third year is not good for business. China has no skin of its own in that war. What matters is that Russia has committed itself to subjugating Ukraine, and that Russian failure could lead to chaos and instability and possibly a re-orientation in Moscow.

Support is not cost-free, though. Whereas North Korea is used to being an impoverished international pariah, and is thus relatively impervious to economic sanctions, China's own prosperity depends on its extensive trade with the West. Therein lies the problem. Russia's war has created unexpected unity among China's largest trading partners in the West. Moreover, Russia's failure to end the war only adds to China's discomfort. Russia has repeatedly mulled the use of [nuclear weapons](#), thus breaking the long-standing taboo. Very recently, it has been accused of using [chemical nerve agents](#) on the battlefield, in breach of numerous conventions. Russian forces have committed grave [war crimes](#) and been accused of committing [cultural genocide](#). Having to defend the indefensible actions of an ally is never pleasant, and the air of complicity becomes harder to dispel over time.

Xi Jinping argues, in a recent op-ed for [Le Figaro](#), that "China did not start the Ukraine crisis, nor is it a party to or a participant in it". Indeed, China has never recognised Russia's

supposed annexations of Ukrainian territory. Yet China nonetheless expends political capital on supporting Russia and keeping others from opposing them. It may soon find itself paying a financial cost too for supporting a war in which it has no interest. As Blinken and Yellen made clear, Western patience with Chinese sanctions-evasion is running low and measures may be taken. China can gamble and try calling their bluff, hope they will not follow through. After all, a trade war between China and the West will be immensely damaging for all. But can China afford to be wrong?

Conclusion

To return to the analogy, China does find itself, like Imperial Germany, propping up a weaker, declining ally hell-bent on military aggression. Even so, we are still several steps from leaders [‘sleepwalking’](#) into a Third World War. There is no saying how China intends to resolve the dilemmas of having to support its ally and protect its own economic interests. One can hope, at least, that China is not led by a man as insecure as Wilhelm II, and will not be prone to engage in reckless grandstanding. Or does history rhyme here too?

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