

FEATURE

UKRAINE WAR

Behind Ukraine peace proposal, China foresees end to war in summer

Simulation by military academy prompts Beijing to push cease-fire plan

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Russian President Vladimir Putin invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Moscow, a trip Xi is still considering. © Reuters

BEIJING -- After avoiding getting too deeply involved in Russia's war in Ukraine over the past year, China suddenly offered a peace proposal last month. Chinese military experts' prediction that the war will come to an end this summer is likely behind this about-face.

When over 200 world leaders and senior officials gathered in Munich for last month's security conference, Wang Yi, China's top diplomat, told the attendees that China would soon announce a plan to become a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

"We will put forth China's position on the political settlement on the Ukraine crisis and stay firm on the side of peace and dialogue," Wang said during the Feb. 18 address.

China formally unveiled its 12-point peace plan on Feb. 24, exactly a year to the day Russia launched its invasion. The proposal called for an early cease-fire and for both sides to restart negotiations toward a peaceful settlement.

The plan itself is prosaic, but it gave the impression that China was suddenly playing an active role.

Beijing has neither condemned Russia's invasion, nor has it joined in the economic sanctions imposed on Moscow. Although China had called for a cease-fire in the past, its leadership has been unwilling to take any concrete actions.

The reason for China's sudden change can be traced back to a report issued two months earlier by a top think tank in Beijing.

The Academy of Military Sciences reports directly to the People's Liberation Army. Although it cannot be found on a map, the institution is located in Beijing's Haidian district, which itself is home to the ruins of Yuanmingyuan, a palace destroyed by Western armies in the 19th century.

The AMS regularly issues recommendations and reports to the Communist Party's Central Military Commission, the highest decision-making body for China's armed forces. A cabinet-level official heads the academy.

In December, the AMS completed a simulation on the Ukraine conflict, resulting in an astonishing finding, according to sources close to the Chinese government. The war will draw to a close around summer 2023, the simulation indicated, with Russia having the upper hand.

Both the Russian and Ukrainian economies would be too exhausted to sustain the war past the summer, the report said.

It is possible that the results were skewed in favor of Russia to please China's Moscow-leaning leadership. But coincidentally, the \$45 billion aid package passed last December in the U.S. is set to expire this summer too.

The Republicans now hold the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, and some party members are skeptical of the generous aid being granted to Ukraine.

"I don't know what will happen to U.S. aid from fall," said a senior official at the Japanese prime minister's office.

The U.S. provides half of the aid that Ukraine receives. The argument that cease-fire talks will get underway before that aid is terminated is not without merit.

After hearing the AMS' prediction, Beijing crafted a peace proposal in time for the one-year anniversary of the war. It aims to achieve three goals, including the restoration of relations with Europe.

The Chinese surveillance balloon incident has caused deeper rifts in Sino-U.S. relations. Japan has aligned with the U.S. over the Taiwan issue.

But Beijing still sees a chance in Europe. Although European countries are expanding weapon aid to Ukraine, some in Germany, France and elsewhere are calling for an early cease-fire.

Beijing believes Europe is still open to direct investments and technology transfers to China, and improved relations with the region would lead to an economic recovery. Given this, many in the Chinese government are calling for Beijing to get involved before the start of cease-fire talks.

The second goal is to maintain friendly relations with Ukraine. China bought a Soviet-manufactured aircraft carrier through Ukraine and refashioned the vessel into the Liaoning, the country's first carrier.

Even as the most Western countries assailed China over reports of human rights abuses, Ukraine has remained mum on the subject.

"Along with Russia, we can't afford to lose Ukraine," said a Chinese government source. The peace plan includes a provision for economic restoration, indicating that China is already considering economic aid.

The final desired aim is for China to play the leading role in bringing about a cease-fire. Chinese President Xi Jinping is considering accepting the invitation to come to Moscow by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"The visit to Russia can't come too soon or too late," said a source well-versed in Chinese diplomacy.

The best scenario for Xi would be for Russia and Ukraine to start negotiations after the Chinese leader presents the peace plan to Putin. That would paint China as a true interlocutor for a cease-fire and put it in an advantageous position to pull Global South countries to its side,

especially those that keep both U.S. and China at arm's length.

Many analysts believe the war will last for the long haul because Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy remains intent on winning back lost territory. Western countries have been increasingly critical of China for allegedly providing weapons to Russia.

If China fails at becoming a peacemaker, the ramifications would undermine Xi's authority and prestige.

It remains to be seen if the current leadership filled with Xi loyalists will be capable of a feat that requires complex negotiating skills and tenacious fortitude.