

**Club of Three/CISS Webinar  
07 July 2022**

**“The Military Situation in Ukraine: Different perceptions, different implications?”**

**Meeting summary**

In July, the Club of Three held a second webinar on the war in Ukraine in collaboration with the China International Institute of Strategic Studies (CISS). The discussion, jointly chaired by Club of Three Chairman Michael Maclay and Professor Lanxin Xiang, Director of the Institute of Security Policy at the China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation (CNISCO), involved some 50 senior figures from the armed forces, diplomacy and business in France, Germany, the UK and China.

The keynote speakers were **General (Ret.) Jean-Paul Paloméros**, former Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, NATO, and Chief of Staff of the French Air Force, 2009-12; **Senior Colonel (Ret.) Li Yaqiang**, Researcher, Naval Research Institute (PLA Navy's Strategic Thinktank) and Chief Military Commentator on the war in Ukraine for CCTV; **Brigadier General (Ret.) Rainer Meyer zum Felde**, former German Representative, NATO's Defence Policy and Planning Committee; **Major General (Ret.) Yang Xuguang**, former Chinese Defence Attaché to the Russian Federation; **General (Ret.) Sir Christopher Deverell**, former Commander of the UK Joint Forces (now Strategic) Command and Member of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 2016-19; and **Senior Colonel (Ret.) Bai Zonglin**, Senior Research Fellow, CISS and former Chinese Defence Attaché to Belgium.

Russia's military intervention in Ukraine had not developed in the way that most observers, from the East and West, had expected. While Russian forces had had their successes in the south and the east of Ukraine, the failure of their assault on Kiev and Kharkiv, and the more nimble and effective strategy and tactics of the Ukrainian forces, had made the headlines so far.

The Ukrainian forces had battled with great determination and displayed higher motivation and morale. Their initial weaknesses in terms of number of troops and equipment had been somewhat redressed by support from the US and from NATO and non-NATO European nations. While Russia's forces still possessed huge advantages in what was currently a mainly artillery war, the outcome was more in the balance than would have seemed likely in February.

The discussion compared European and Chinese perceptions of the war, and encouraged observations and educated speculation on what the prospects were. Some European military figures had experience of working with Ukrainians now fighting on the front line; for their part, Chinese military and academic figures had considerable knowledge of the command structures and the culture of Russia's army, which shared some common origins given similarities between the old Soviet Red Army and the People's Liberation Army.

The Chinese view of the current situation was that Russia was close to accomplishing the goals of the second phase of this war: taking control of the Donbas region. The Ukrainians were highly skilled soldiers and they had a remarkable fighting spirit. Their senior commanders came from the ranks of the Soviet Army and were very familiar with Russian military strategies and tactics. They were well prepared for Russia's attempted takeover of Kiev's airport, which mirrored the plan executed in 1979 during the USSR's intervention in Kabul.

However, Chinese participants believed that Russia's far superior capabilities and very high tolerance to military losses meant that it would eventually gain victory on the battlefield. The number of troops deployed to Ukraine, around 200,000 at the start of the invasion, limited Russia's ability to control large areas of land. But its forces were now engaged in a relentless war of attrition that gave them a clear advantage. In their opinion, military aid alone would not change the balance of power. It was nearly impossible for the Ukrainians to reverse the tide. Ultimately, the Chinese felt that neither side could completely defeat the other and that the war would most probably end with a ceasefire. If a ceasefire agreement was based on actual gains on the ground, Ukraine was set to lose five or six eastern regions (or oblasts). And it was possible that Russia might want to establish a favourable line of defence along the Dnieper River. A cold winter could help Russia.

European participants agreed that an absolute winner was unlikely but they were more hopeful about Ukrainian forces' ability to push back. A French general pointed out that military capabilities per se were not always the most decisive factor in war. They had to be deployed and used effectively and reliably, and the lack of precision displayed by Russian forces so far was a significant weakness. This had been exploited by Ukrainian forces to their advantage but it had also led to great collateral damage with significant civilian casualties. This was at odds with NATO's doctrine which emphasised causing minimum collateral damage.

A British general was of the opinion that although Russia was more successful during phase two of its invasion of Ukraine, it would sooner rather than later have to pause in order to rearm and bolster its troops. Its territorial gains in eastern Ukraine had come at a great cost. It was losing the equivalent of one battalion every two days and was using around 20,000 artillery rounds a day. The next phase of consolidation during which Russian and Ukrainian forces will rearm was going to be critical. This will be a battle of logistics and economic might, and if the West showed sufficient determination in its support of Ukraine, Kiev might be able to regain some advantage. Russia was now mobilising its economy to support the war effort but the impact of Western sanctions was making the supply of critical equipment difficult.

Chinese participants emphasised that Europe should aim to bring an end to the conflict as soon as possible. Its continued military support to Ukraine alongside that of the United States was only prolonging hostilities and increasing day by day the already huge cost of reconstruction, currently estimated at £750bn. They vehemently rejected as "completely baseless" the assertion made by one of the German participants that China was supporting Russia in this war. China was a peaceful nation, they insisted, a friend of both Russia and Ukraine and a major contributor to

peacekeeping efforts around the world. Europe on the other hand was not a bystander and was directly responsible for what was currently going on in Ukraine. By way of reply, one of the British participants explained that Europe could not sit by and let another European country be extinguished in a war of conquest.

Questions were asked by the Europeans about whether China could act as a peacemaker and even to be a guarantor of security in Ukraine alongside Europe, the US and Russia. While professing to understand European concerns, the reply from the Chinese side was that Europe could “not add fuel to the fire and expect China to put out that fire”.

Some of the Europeans welcomed Chinese assurances that no military support was given by China. But there were clear concerns about the political backing that Russia had received. One of the Europeans present maintained that Russia and China were “ganging up” on the West and that relations with China were now entering a phase of confrontation. Another participant, from France, took a more conciliatory stance: confrontation with China should be avoided at all costs. Europe did not need another Cold War on top of dealing with Russia. The main victims would be the poorest populations around the world that are most vulnerable to energy and food crises, and economic shocks. Europe needed a strong partnership with China.

As far as NATO was concerned, the Chinese were highly critical of the outcome of the latest Summit in Madrid. The 2022 Strategic Concept that was adopted there, in which China was now regarded as a challenge, amounted to a “declaration of Cold War” and was an “open letter for NATO to interfere in global security affairs”. This showed that NATO was driven by ideology and not facts. This expansionism beyond the Euro-Atlantic region was not supported by public opinion in NATO countries. In particular, inviting Indo-Pacific partners to Madrid was seen as a provocation. Chinese suspicion of NATO ran deep: one of them cited the attack on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999. Another pointed out that NATO and China had managed to gradually establish a dialogue after the Afghanistan war, and that it was unclear from a Chinese perspective why NATO was becoming more confrontational vis-à-vis China. According to the Chinese, NATO had transformed from a military-political organisation into a political-military one.

A former senior NATO Commander stressed that peace and security in Europe could not be dissociated from what was happening in other parts of the world, which is why NATO also addresses other security challenges. In his opinion, NATO would not engage significantly in the Indo-Pacific. However, there needed to be a conversation on a new global security arrangement as the UN Security Council was no longer functioning properly, and NATO could play a role in initiating this conversation.

In Europe, the Europeans noted that although Russia had had some military achievements in Ukraine, its decision to go to war had been strategically counter-productive overall. Far from removing the perceived threat from NATO, it had led to further expansion eastwards with the forthcoming admission of Finland and Sweden.