

Washington manoeuvres as Beijing pushes for Ukraine peace talks

Peter Symonds
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As China's pursues its efforts to start negotiations to end the US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia, the US appears to have switched tack from outright rejection to guarded and conditional support. While determined to pursue its war aims of crushing Moscow, Washington is manoeuvring to prevent Beijing from taking advantage of cracks appearing in the NATO alliance as the conflict grinds on.

The Chinese government announced a 12-point plan in February to facilitate talks "so as to gradually de-escalate the situation and ultimately reach a comprehensive cease-fire." US Secretary of State Antony Blinken slammed the proposal, claiming any call for a ceasefire "that does not include the removal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory," would effectively be "the ratification of Russian conquest."

Nevertheless, Beijing has continued to advocate the plan. Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky on April 26 for the first time since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. China has insisted that it maintains a neutral position, refusing to condemn the Russian military intervention but, at the same time, not supporting Russian annexations of Ukrainian territory.

While reiterating that there could be no peace at the expense of territorial compromises, Zelensky declared it had been "a long and meaningful phone call" with the Chinese leader covering the full range of bilateral issues. "Particular attention was paid to the ways of possible cooperation to establish a just and sustainable peace for Ukraine," he said in a statement.

China's foreign ministry quoted Xi as saying that "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity is the political basis of China-Ukrainian relations." Beijing's lack of support for Russian annexations stems from its concerns that the US will exploit

separatist tendencies within China, particularly in Taiwan, to undermine its territorial integrity.

Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang is in Europe this week for talks with his counterparts in Germany, France and Norway to push, in particular, its plan for talks to deescalate the Ukraine war. The visit follows high-level visits by French President Emmanuel Macron and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock to Beijing last month.

Macron's comments in China highlighted the differences within Europe and with the US over strategic issues, including relations with Beijing and any Chinese involvement in seeking to de-escalate the Ukraine war. Far from rejecting China's peace proposals, he reportedly called on President Xi to "bring Russia back to a reasonable policy in Ukraine," to which Xi responded by pledging to "work with France" to prevent a further deterioration in the Ukraine crisis.

At the same time, Macron made clear that France and Europe should not follow the US blindly as it accelerates its war drive against China. Europe, he said, should not allow itself to be drawn into crises "that are not ours." If it is only a "follower" on the subject of Taiwan and "adapts to the American pace and a Chinese overreaction," Europe would become a "vassal."

Macron's remarks provoked a sharp rebuke from the European Union and Germany in particular. The German foreign ministry declared that while it was opposed to fierce competition with China, the belief that Europe could stand aside in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan was absurd. During her visit, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock played down any policy differences with France.

Nevertheless, those differences were on display this

week as Baerbock sparred publicly with Chinese foreign minister Qin in Berlin on Tuesday. Qin insisted on Beijing's neutrality in the Ukraine war, declaring "China will neither watch the fire from the other bank nor add fuel to the fire." Baerbock, however, while stating that China could play a significant role in ending the war, rejected its diplomatic stance, saying "neutrality means taking the side of the aggressor."

Amid these signs of tension within NATO over the Ukraine war, the US has softened its attitude to China's proposal for negotiations. In an interview with *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius last week, Secretary of State Blinken cautiously declared that "in principle, there's nothing wrong with if "China or other countries that have significant influence that are prepared to pursue a just and durable peace... it's certainly possible that China would have a role to play in that effort. And that could be very beneficial."

Blinken went on to state that there were some "positive" items in China's 12-point peace plan including respecting "the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries," which implies a Russian troop withdrawal. He also declared that the Xi-Zelensky phone call had been "a positive thing, because it's vitally important that China and other countries that have been seeking to advance peace hear from the victim, not just the aggressor."

The purpose of the endless denunciations of Russian aggression by the US and its close allies is to obscure the fact that the primary responsibility for the war rests with American imperialism which has, by expanding NATO borders to encroach on Russia, deliberately goaded Moscow into launching military action. Washington, which is pressing Kiev into launching a spring offensive, has to date rejected any talks that do not start with Moscow's complete capitulation.

In his commentary, Ignatius pointed to the motive behind Washington's latest response to Beijing's proposal for peace talks. As he stated, the US initially dismissed the plan as part of its efforts to block a broader Chinese role in Europe and "keep European allies from making sweetheart deals with Beijing." However, "when even Zelensky—who depends on US military aid for his country's survival—is welcoming contact with Xi, excluding China might be unrealistic."

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* last weekend noted: "The interest in negotiations brings Washington

in closer alignment with some European countries, which are eager to see the conflict end, or at the very least moderate in intensity, and have been the most intent on discussing some resolution this year."

However, at the same time, the *Journal* pointed out US support for negotiations is linked to the planned offensive in Ukraine. Citing unnamed senior French and German officials, the article said the expectation was that "the aim is for Ukraine to regain important territory in the south, a development that could be interpreted as a success even if Russia retains chunks of territory its forces have occupied."

These comments make clear that the US shift is purely tactical. While nominally allowing Beijing to proceed, Washington will do everything in its power to sabotage any peace talks as it continues to inflict military defeats on Russia. US imperialism's strategic aims in provoking the war in Ukraine remain the same: to recklessly prosecute the war so as to weaken, destabilise and break up Russia regardless of the terrible consequences for the Ukrainian and Russian people and the dangers of plunging the world into a global conflict involving nuclear-armed powers.



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