



Hybrid Escalation, Strategic Patience: Will Moscow's Adventurism Inspire Beijing?

Yang Zi



The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Hybrid Escalation, Strategic Patience: Will Moscow's Adventurism Inspire Beijing?

Yang Zi

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- As Russia escalates its confrontations with NATO countries, China is watching the situation with caution, wary that a Russia-NATO conflict could upend its relations with Europe. Yet, as of now, China is unlikely to use its influence to restrain Russian actions.
- Amid rising worldwide instability, China is boosting efforts to achieve its grand strategic aim of global primacy, which, combined with US security guarantees to Asian allies, constrains how far China could escalate ongoing grey-zone conflicts.

COMMENTARY

In a [recent CNN interview](#), Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski pointed out that Russia has, since early September, been stoking tensions in Europe through a “hybrid war” by intensifying aerial incursions into several NATO countries using both manned and unmanned aircraft.

On 9 and 10 September, more than a dozen [Russian drones breached Polish airspace](#). On 14 September, Romania reported that a Russian drone had violated its airspace. Five days later, three [Russian fighter jets invaded Estonia's airspace](#), just days after the conclusion of the Russian-Belarusian Zapad 2025 joint military exercises, which included a simulated Russian nuclear strike. During the week of 22 September, drone sightings in Denmark and Norway forced temporary airport closures. The most recent incident occurred on 27 September, when drones were [spotted near Denmark's largest military base](#). Although Denmark's prime minister [stopped short](#) of directly blaming Russia, [suspicions of Moscow's role remain high](#).

These incursions are part of Russia's broader hybrid warfare strategy – designed to test European resolve, probe NATO air defences, sow fear and uncertainty, and intimidate European leaders.

As tensions across Europe mount, even the Russia-friendly US President Donald Trump appears to be rethinking his position towards Moscow. On 22 September, Trump urged NATO countries to shoot down Russian aircraft violating their airspace. He also dismissed Russia as a “[paper tiger](#)” and argued that, with NATO and European support, Ukraine could win back all of its territories – a major shift from his earlier stance on Ukraine's future. Whether this represents a genuine policy change remains to be seen. Two days after Trump's remarks, four Russian military planes entered the [Alaskan Air Defense Identification Zone](#) – the third such incursion in September. In a [2 October speech](#), Russian President Vladimir Putin struck a defiant tone, declaring that all NATO countries are currently fighting Russia.

Beijing is undoubtedly monitoring these developments between Russia – its closest ally – and NATO. But how might China perceive Russia's latest moves? More importantly, will it be inspired to adopt similar escalatory measures against its rivals in Asia? Beijing likely harbours concerns about intensifying hostilities in Europe, and its grand strategy of achieving global leadership limits its ability to escalate conflicts in Asia for now.

How Might Beijing Perceive Tensions in Europe?

As a country that is actively engaged in low-intensity conflicts, China understands Russia's intentions and broader strategy. However, Moscow's simultaneous targeting of multiple NATO countries carries significant risks. If Beijing did not have prior knowledge of Russia's escalation plans, its response would likely range from neutral to mildly concerned. Despite strains in their political relationship, China and the European Union (EU) remain significant economic partners: in 2024, bilateral trade reached [US\\$785.8 billion](#). Rising tensions between Russia and NATO raise the spectre of direct conflict, as accidents or miscalculations could quickly spiral out of control. China has already lost [significant investments in Ukraine](#) due to the war, and any major military confrontation between Russia and NATO would damage China-EU trade relations. Given its close alignment with Moscow, Europe would likely come to view China as a hostile state in such a conflict, endangering one of Beijing's most critical economic links.

Beijing thus has strong incentives to be concerned about the unintended consequences of Russia's hybrid war in Europe. Unlike Russia's previous adversaries, NATO represents a vastly superior opponent. While the Ukraine War remains a limited conflict with disproportionate [international economic repercussions](#), a direct NATO-Russia confrontation could escalate into a global conflict that would devastate the world economy, inevitably affecting China and deepening its domestic economic woes.

In sum, escalating tensions in Europe create valid concerns in Beijing due to the serious potential consequences. Still, as of now, China is unlikely to try to restrain Putin as tensions are not yet near the threshold of irreversibility.

Should Asian Countries Anticipate Similar Escalations?

At the outset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, [a key debate](#) among analysts was whether China might follow suit with a similar military operation in the Taiwan Strait. Under current conditions, could Russia's escalatory measures inspire China to heighten ongoing disputes or destabilise the security balance in Asia?

Beijing's strategy for global preeminence is twofold: applying pressure on US allies on its peripheries while simultaneously courting developing states. While US security guarantees to its Asian allies serve as a strong deterrent, China's own grand strategy also limits the extent that it can escalate regional conflicts.

In recent years, China has steadily increased military pressure in the Taiwan Strait and repeatedly clashed with the Philippines in the South China Sea – both directed at staunch US allies that are critical links in the First Island Chain. At the same time, Beijing has expanded its influence across the Global South, especially as the United States adopts a more [isolationist and unilateralist posture](#) that has created anxiety among developing nations. This year, China has [strengthened existing alliances](#) and promoted new [security initiatives](#), drawing more states closer to its orbit. Chinese President Xi Jinping appears to be reviving Mao Zedong's approach of positioning China as the leader of the "[Third World](#)", in order to counterbalance US power and its alliances.

As China seeks to consolidate its influence among developing nations and undercut US leadership, it must act with prudence to avoid derailing its own strategic designs. China has been promoting itself as a [defender of stability and the status quo](#) – a message that resonates with developing countries amid rising uncertainty about the eroding international order. Consequently, any reckless or overly aggressive moves in Asia at this time risk alienating these states, potentially driving them into the Western fold and prematurely terminating China's ambitions to displace US leadership.

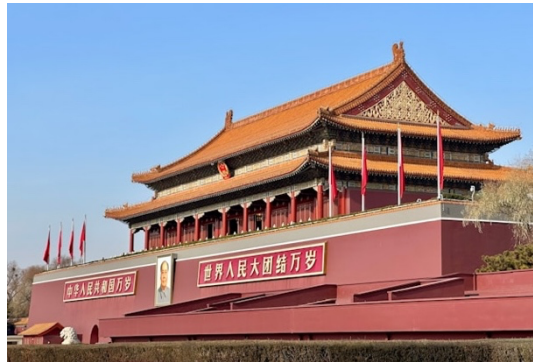
Thus, while escalatory actions in Asia could serve short-term strategic goals, they would jeopardise China's longer-term grand strategy of global primacy. For now, there is little evidence to suggest that Beijing is willing to sacrifice its grand strategic aspirations for immediate military gains in its neighbourhood.

Conclusion

The implications of Russia's actions extend well beyond Europe. China has also exhibited growing military strength, sending an [assertive message](#) with the Victory Day Parade on 3 September. While Beijing's military capabilities are impressive, there are concerns that China could be emboldened by Moscow's behaviour to adopt a more adventurist path – an alarming prospect for its neighbours.

However, China is probably cautiously observing the events in Europe and is unlikely to escalate in a comparable manner for the time being. The United States' [domestic turmoil](#) and retrenchment from international leadership has offered China a golden opportunity to expand its influence and pursue its overarching objective of reducing the US's global primacy – in Sun Tzu's words: "to win without fighting". By portraying

itself as a defender of the status quo, China seeks to cultivate support among developing countries wary of instability and conflict.



By positioning itself as a defender of the status quo, China seeks to cultivate international support and to “win without fighting”. *Image Source: Unsplash.*

While following Russia’s adventurist path might allow China to temporarily increase pressure on adversarial governments in Asia, such a course risks upsetting its grand strategy of securing global preeminence. China’s leaders, known to be more strategically patient, are likely to prioritise long-term objectives to reshape the world order in their country’s favour over short-term gains that could be detrimental to their larger grand strategic designs.

Yang Zi is a Research Fellow in the China Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.

