



The Ukrainian Matinee: Response from China

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In February 2014, a crisis began to unfold which gave a new turn to the relations of Russia and Ukraine. Crimean crisis was one of the repercussions of the anti-government protests in Ukraine. As a consequence of the protests, on March 16, 2014 a referendum to merge Crimea into Russia was passed and subsequently, Crimea was incorporated into Russia. This incident attracted scathing criticisms against Russia from the West. Western countries termed it an annexation and maintain that it is no less than an injury to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a response to Russia's move of incorporating Crimea into its territory, the US imposed a number of sanctions on Russia.

Of late, the Ukraine episode has been occupying a substantial space in international debates arena, not only because of the upheavals in the Far Eastern region of Ukraine but also for the fact that it is most likely to have repercussions on the East Asian Region, if not anywhere else.

While countries like the US and the United Kingdom opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea, China seems to be on Russia's side. Though it has not stated it publicly, China's actions reveal it supports Russia on this issue which has been termed as "positive neutrality".ⁱ On this count, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Qin Gang reiterated that "China respects the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine"ⁱⁱ; however, despite this declaration, China has not raised its voice against Russia sending troops to incorporate Crimea. Interestingly, when, on March 27, 2014, the General Assembly voted to decide the status of the

Crimean referendum, China abstained. To all counts, China played a masterstroke when it abstained from the voting. This piece will analyse this deduction.

There are four reasons to this stand of China. First, China, a proponent of ‘non-interference in internal matters’, perceived the anti-government protests in Ukraine as an outcome of west’s intervention into the country. For instance, a Xinhua commentary stated that, “the West’s biased mediation has polarised Ukraine and only made things worse in the country”.ⁱⁱⁱ For China, supporting Russia on this issue would help it in its efforts of resisting western intervention in the region.

Second, amid rising tension over maritime disputes between China and its neighbours, China did not wish to antagonise Russia, its immediate neighbour and an important arms supplier, by voting against it in the resolution. The importance of Russia in China’s foreign manoeuvres can be gauged from the fact that when Chinese President, Xi Jinping assumed his responsibilities in March 2013, his maiden foreign visit was to Moscow. Moreover, denouncing Russian President, Vladimir Putin’s decision to send troops to Ukraine would have jeopardised the evolving strategic partnership between Beijing and Moscow. Worse, standing against Moscow would mean China was standing with the West^{iv}, as the phrase “you’re either with us or against us” means.

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The third reasoning to China’s current position on the issue would be China’s fear of anti-government protests in the country. Protests and revolutions in China’s immediate and far neighbourhood have been a sensitive issue for the Chinese leadership. For instance, when Arab spring rocked the West Asian region, China was most apprehensive of its citizens getting influenced by such a protest; government began to monitor the social networking sites in the

country so as to stop the proliferation of messages that it considered provocative. China is wary of an impact of the “coloured revolutions” on its domestic political situation, as well as in Xinjiang and Tibet.^v In fact, Ukraine’s own “Orange Revolution” in 2004 made China anxious for it feared that those revolutions could have instigated protests in China’s northwestern and western regions which are considered to be China’s most restive regions. The Chinese government has long speculated that the colour revolutions are fuelled by Western nations to oust unfriendly regimes—and Beijing itself remains wary that the US is trying to foment another colour revolution within China.^{vi}

Fourth, in present circumstances, when China did not oppose Russia sending troops to Crimea, it would not be wrong to say that Russia’s move to include Crimea into its territory gives China an excuse to justify its expansionist policies. In fact, by supporting Russia, in a way, China is gaining legitimacy for its occupation of Tibet. Furthermore, the Russian taking over of Crimea presents both a precedent and a window of opportunity to press China’s sovereignty claims harder, especially in the South China Sea.^{vii}

It is important to note that though China abstained from voting in the United Nations, it is not overtly supporting Russia. Though China supports Russian actions in Ukraine but it does not wish to be seen as a Russian ally by the US and others. What the world has witnessed is different from the ground reality. China’s ‘positive neutrality’ on Ukrainian issue has been rewarded by Russia in a way. On May 20, 2014, China and Russia concluded a 30 year agreement for supply of natural gas from Russia to China. This means that even if Russia suspends its supply of gas to Ukraine and other EU members, its economy will not suffer much as it would already have a market for its gas supplies. In addition to this, both countries have hinted at elevating their strategic partnership further. And why not, it is a win-win situation for both China and Russia.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies - CAPS)

End Notes

ⁱ Vladimir Radyuhin, “A Sino-Russia Strategic Embrace Likely”, *The Hindu*, May 20, 2014 at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/world/a-sinorussia-strategic-embrace-likely/article6026764.ece> (accessed on May 21, 2014).

ⁱⁱ “China Wants Respect for All Ukrainian Ethnic Groups”, *China Daily*, March 6, 2014 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-03/06/content_17328577.htm (accessed on May 2, 2014).

ⁱⁱⁱ Lu Yu, “West Should Work, Not Against, Russia in Handling Ukraine Crisis”, *The Xinhua News Agency*, March 3, 2014 at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2014-03/03/c_133154966.htm (accessed on March 30, 2014).

^{iv} Shannon Tiezzi, “China Backs Russia on Ukraine”, *The Diplomat*, March 4, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/03/china-backs-russia-on-ukraine/> (accessed on April 20, 2014).

^v Srikanth Kondapalli, “China and the Ukraine Crisis: Walking on the Razor’s Edge”, *IPCS*, March 24, 2014 <http://www.ipcs.org/article/china/china-and-the-ukraine-crisis-walking-on-the-razors-edge-4352.html> (accessed on March 24, 2014).

^{vi} Same as n. 4.

^{vii} Euan Graham, “Russia’s Crimean Annexation: What it Means for East Asia”, *RSIS Commentaries*, March 25, 2014 (accessed on April 10, 2014).