



BULLETIN

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China's Ambivalence: The PRC's Position on the Events in Ukraine

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China holds a cautious position towards the recent events in Ukraine. Beijing is neither willing to openly condemn Russia's intervention in Crimea nor back the U.S. and EU, which support the new Ukrainian authorities. China, with its principle of non-interference and frequent recent calls to safeguard the rights and interests of all ethnic groups living in Ukraine, is pursuing an approach that leaves it with room to manoeuvre. The PRC wants to remain neutral and maintain good relations with both Russia and the West, hoping for the same attitude in case of a similar crisis in China. EU and Poland, though, should maintain regular contacts with China as they look for a solution to the Ukrainian crisis.

China's Stance. Since the beginning of the political crisis in Ukraine, China has been cautious. The government has not issued official statements and the PRC's opinions are presented by the MFA's spokesperson at regular press conferences and conveyed through "telephone diplomacy." In the last few days, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has had a phone conversation on Ukraine with his counterparts from Russia (Sergey Lavrov on 3 March), Germany (Frank-Walter Steinmeier on 4 March), France (Laurent Fabius on 4 March) and Poland (Radosław Sikorski on 5 March), while PRC Chairman Xi Jinping held telephone talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin (4 March), German Chancellor Angela Merkel (9 March), and U.S. President Barack Obama (10 March). Minister Wang also answered a question about Ukraine at a press conference (8 March) held shortly after the start of the second session of the Chinese parliament.

Since the end of last November, China has said it is closely following the situation in Ukraine and has been calling on all parties to find a peaceful settlement to the crisis. At the beginning of the crisis, President Viktor Yanukovich paid an official visit to China, in early December. At that time both sides stressed the desire to deepen their strategic partnership (established during Hu Jintao's visit in Kyiv in June 2011); however, China did not confirm the monetary value of agreements and financial assistance for Ukraine reached during the visit, one of the main goals of Yanukovich's trip to Beijing, though the president later announced the signing of multibillion-dollar contracts.

When the situation in Ukraine degraded and resulted in tens of people killed, China expressed deep concern and condemned the eruption of violence. Simultaneously, Beijing assured Ukraine that it would respect its sovereignty and abide by China's principle of non-interference. After Yanukovich left the country and Oleksandr Turchynov was appointed interim president, China again stressed that it would not interfere in the internal affairs of Ukraine, but it did note its respect for the independent choice made by the Ukrainian people.

When Russia threatened armed intervention in Crimea, China did not issue an official position. An announcement put on the MFA website on 2 March was an answer to a journalist's question. Beijing condemned the violence in Ukraine and called on all parties to solve the problems peacefully and according to law, while protecting the rights of all ethnic groups and urgently restoring social order in the country. The response also highlighted that along with maintaining the principle of non-interference, China respects Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. In answering a question on 3 March about whether China recognises the new authorities in Kyiv, the Chinese spokesperson stated that the judgment of it must be made according to Ukrainian law.

However, China's most recent statements on Ukraine are more ambiguous. The Chinese leaders very vaguely argue that there are reasons for why the situation in Ukraine is as it is today and that these should be taken into account,

including a complicated history of recent events. What is more, since 2 March the term “territorial integrity” has not been used in government statements and several times leaders have called for protecting the interests of all ethnic groups in Ukraine. Moreover, the Xinhua state news agency has published editorials that suggest Western countries’ engagement in Ukraine is among the reasons for the current crisis in Ukraine.

Reasons for China’s Ambiguity. In the last decade, China has carefully observed similar crises in other post-Soviet states. Of primary concern to Beijing were the so called colour revolutions, which were seen as potential inspiration for social discontent in China aimed at authorities there. China took a similar approach towards the events in Tunisia and Egypt. In both cases, China was very cautious and only discussed the protests while avoiding wider explanations of the reasons. The same scenario is being followed today.

China’s attitude towards the current situation in Crimea has been consistent with its principle of non-interference, a fundament of China’s foreign policy. It seems to be apparent that Beijing is not supportive of military intervention in Ukraine or the upcoming referendum in Crimea as it may cause a domino effect in the post-Soviet states in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Intervention in Ukraine might result in the destabilisation of an area where China has launched its new “Silk Road” diplomacy. What is more, the PRC is afraid of the negative implication if Crimea secedes from Ukraine on China’s own territorial integrity, e.g., destabilisation in Tibet or Xinjiang and the strengthening independence sentiments in Taiwan.

China for now will also refrain from taking any legal action (sanctions, UN resolutions) related to the events in Ukraine, taking into account its experience related to the crisis in Libya. In that case, China voted in favour of Resolution 1970, which introduced sanctions and abstained from voting on Resolution 1973, which established a no-fly zone over Libya. Beijing argues that the latter resolution, officially aimed at protecting civilians, was used as justification for NATO’s military intervention, and as a result changed the political regime in Libya. The Libyan experience was among the reasons why China vetoed (together with Russia) the UN’s resolutions on Syria. Even so, it seems that when taking into account these experiences, China will not be eager to officially accept Russian intervention in Ukraine or a change of Crimea’s status.

China is also paying attention to its international image. The PRC’s stance on the situation in Ukraine seems to be similar to its approach on Syria in 2013. Last year, Russia was much more active than China, which was trying to be neutral and calling for a dialogue and peaceful resolution to the crisis. It’s “manoeuvring approach”, which aims to put it somewhere between the West (mainly the U.S. and the EU) and Russia, allows China to maintain good relations with all of its partners while hoping for the same attitude in case of a similar crisis in China.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Taking into account China’s domestic problems and its principle of non-interference, which is a core of PRC diplomacy, a change in China’s stance on the Ukrainian crisis seems unlikely. Engaging on or giving the crisis a high profile are not in China’s interest.

Despite announcements offering respect for the decisions made by the Ukrainian people, which might be perceived as indirect recognition of the new government, official recognition in the near term is highly unlikely. China will likely be waiting for the results of the planned elections in May 2014 in Ukraine. But it seems to be apparent that China’s interests—economic (e.g., supply of agricultural products) and military cooperation with Ukraine—mean Beijing is highly interested in a prompt return to stability.

Depending on the evolution of events, China will continue its balanced approach. On the one hand, a slight distance from Russia is in China’s interest, bearing in mind the rivalry with Russia in Central Asia. But on other hand, Russia is important for China as a counterbalance to the U.S. in Asia. China’s great reluctance to back the U.S. and EU, which are engaged in Ukraine and openly support the new government, might be seen as giving a nod to Russia’s involvement in Ukraine. Despite the fact that Sino–Russian relations are defined as a strategic partnership, neither country overestimates its relevance, and Beijing and Moscow compete for influence in Central Asia. Nevertheless, it seems apparent that China will not openly condemn Russia, as is not interested in deteriorating relations with Moscow. Recent statements that do not mention “territorial integrity” and “non-interference” terms, but give attention to safeguarding the rights of ethnic groups, and state media editorials that sometimes might be interpreted as pro-Russian, are evidence of China’s “manoeuvring approach.” Even so, it seems obvious that China will not recognise the separation of Crimea from Ukraine or the independence of the region.

China’s strategy and willingness to play a role as a neutral observer means that the U.S., EU and Poland cannot expect China to actively and openly engage on the Ukrainian crisis or to support the West against Russia. Nevertheless, China’s “telephone diplomacy” and calls for political and diplomatic efforts to solve the crisis and support mediation indicate that Beijing would like to be perceived as an honest broker. The EU and Poland should maintain regular contact with China in order to be informed about China’s latest position, while seeking the best solution to the crisis in Ukraine.