



## CHINA AND UKRAINE: PRINCIPLED POLICY OR POWER POLITICS?

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Russian president Vladimir Putin's actions with regard to the unrest in Ukraine put the Chinese leadership in an exceedingly delicate position. A cornerstone of the country's foreign policy since 1954 has been its adherence to the Pancha Shila, or Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, with their insistence on non-aggression and non-interference in the sovereign affairs of other countries.<sup>1</sup> China's "principled stance" on non-aggression and non-interference has been used, among other instances, to object to the United Nations effort to force Iraqi president Saddam Hussein to relinquish his takeover of Kuwait,<sup>2</sup> against the decision of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to induce the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to halt the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, and in defense of regimes in the Middle East during the Arab Spring. Putin's actions clearly violated the Five Principles and should therefore have been unequivocally condemned.

That didn't happen. Although the Russian foreign ministry announced that the two countries had "broadly coinciding views" on the situation in Ukraine, "broadly" is a conveniently ambiguous term that can obscure inconvenient but important differences of views. Foreign Minister Wang Yi as well as official spokespersons have dispensed largely meaningless anodynes about deep concern for the crisis and on the need for dialogue even as Putin effects a *fait accompli*, with Russian troops fanning out in key positions in the Crimea and a date set for a referendum in which Crimeans will vote on whether they want to stay in Ukraine. The latter is at variance with the country's constitution, which says that the entire country would have to vote on such matters. For China to accept this has uncomfortable implications for Beijing's position on the independence of Taiwan: it has consistently held that all citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC)—to which Taiwan has never belonged—should have the right to vote on the island's independence.

<sup>1</sup> The Five Principles are 1. mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; 2. mutual non-aggression; 3. mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; 4. equality and mutual benefit; 5. peaceful co-existence.

<sup>2</sup> When it was pointed out that Saddam had already violated the Five Principles by invading Kuwait, the Chinese response was that "two wrongs do not make a right."

Yet China has important reasons for supporting Putin and, indirectly, the incursion itself. Official pronouncements typically refer to the country as China's most reliable strategic partner. The PRC's strategists see Ukraine as in the midst of a tug of war between East and West, with their country's interests solidly on the side of the East. The Russian and Chinese leaderships have similar views on such matters as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, as well as a common interest in supporting autocracy. Beijing sees a diminution of its own position if Ukraine becomes better integrated with the West. This view has an eerie resonance with Chairman Mao Zedong's famous advice to the Soviet Union in 1957: the west wind must not be allowed to triumph over the east wind. When, this past November, Putin appeared to think this might be happening, he offered Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich \$15 billion in economic assistance to become part of the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Customs Union rather than move toward a closer relationship with the European Union. Yanukovich's acceptance infuriated pro-Western Ukrainians, resulting in charges that he had been bribed and massive demonstrations that led to Yanukovich's resignation from power. Chinese sources have mentioned the involvement of foreign forces in this, though carefully not specifying either the names of the putative interferers or the means the foreign forces are employing to do so.

There are also economic reasons why China does not want to incur Putin's displeasure. Russia is an important source of energy for China. After a dispute with Ukraine in the 2005-2009 period, Russia temporarily cut off gas supplies, and could do the same to China. Doubtless mindful of this, Beijing has announced its unequivocal opposition to imposing sanctions on Russia.

On the other hand, common views on opposition to democracy and human rights do not necessarily make close allies. Neither side is unmindful of the tensions that have caused periodic problems in their relations in the past, and each is wary of the implications of the rise in power of the other, as can be seen in the negotiations about how many troops each will contribute to periodic joint military exercises, and what territories they may pass through. Although it ratified Putin's actions in South Ossetia in 2008, Beijing was palpably uneasy with their implications for its problems with separatist-seekers in China. If, as seems likely, Russia does gain control over the Crimea and, ultimately, predominant influence over Ukraine, it will have extended its reach further into what Russian strategists call the Near Beyond—i.e., the sway of the former Soviet empire. The Baltic and Eastern European states have already expressed uneasiness that they will be next. Georgia has reported Russian helicopter incursions of its airspace, believing that their purpose is surveillance of its border posts. With a land area a third the size of Russia itself, Ukraine has far greater significance than these. An old saying has it that Russia without the Ukraine is just a country, while Russia with the Ukraine is an empire.<sup>3</sup> This is an empire that Chinese leaders have unhappy memories of, and no wish to see re-created. For its part, Russia is concerned with the rise of China and worried that the large influx of Chinese immigrants into the heretofore sparsely populated Russia Far East may portend a loss of Moscow's control over that area. Moscow's willingness to sell advanced fighter planes to India and Vietnam, with whom Beijing has prickly relations, contributes to the Chinese leadership's concern about being encircled.

Meanwhile, the Western states also struggle to cope with the changing geopolitical implications of an expanding Russia. Washington has few options. Sanctions, on the rare occasions they work, take a long time to do so, by which time Russia's presence will have been consolidated. Economic arrangements are typically undertaken because they are mutually beneficial, and therefore sanctions tend to hurt not only the country sanctioned but the sanctioners as well. Britain has already indicated it is reluctant to participate in financial sanctions because of the effects on its economy; the Japanese fear that they will destroy the country's fragile recovery from a twenty-year financial slump, and the Chinese have refused point-blank. Their financial exchanges are, respectively, the third, fourth, and seventh largest in the world.

As for energy sanctions, suggestions that America compensate European states for the loss of Russian gas with the products of its fracking are not feasible since current U.S. production is less than a sixth of what would be needed. Faced with the virtual certainty of loss of influence over Ukraine, the Obama administration seems resigned to accepting the inevitable while assuring nervous Baltic and Eastern European states of its support.

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<sup>3</sup> Feng Yujun, director of the Institute of Russian Studies at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR, one of the PRC's leading think tanks) cited this saying, though attributing it to Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Renmin Ribao*, February 24, 2014.

Contrary to assessments that China has issued a “soft nyet” to Russia’s intervention in Ukraine,<sup>4</sup> Beijing has chosen to employ verbal acrobatics to substantiate its claim to uphold the principle of non-intervention while in fact supporting intervention. Having carefully weighed the uncomfortable alternatives, the PRC will support Russian expansion. In return, it will expect, and doubtless get, reciprocal support from Russia for its actions in the East and South China seas and Taiwan. Its obfuscatory rhetoric notwithstanding, China has chosen power politics over principled policy.

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth C. Economy, “China’s Soft ‘Nyet’ to Russia’s Ukraine Intervention,” *Forbes*. March 5, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/elizabetheconomy/2014/03/05/chinas-soft-nyet-to-russias-ukraine-intervention/>