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## China's Dilemma in the Ukraine Crisis

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**Sheng Ding**, Associate Professor of Political Science at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, explains that “What is currently unfolding in Ukraine is a multifaceted political disaster for the communist government in China.”

As the Ukraine crisis continues to unfold, raucous voices have been raised and shuttle diplomacy has become increasingly frenzied between the great powers of Russia, the United States, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. Set against this international drama, China, also a great power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, has been watching from afar. On March 15, with a bizarre excuse that “the draft resolution will only lead to confrontation among all parties, which will further complicate the situation,” China abstained from the Security Council’s draft resolution that would have condemned the March 16 referendum in Crimea aimed at legitimizing the transfer of Crimea from Ukraine to Russia. After the referendum that was overwhelmingly in favor of Russia, China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson made a formulaic comment: “China always respects all countries’ sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. The Crimean issue should be resolved politically under a framework of law and order. All parties should exercise restraint and refrain from raising tension.” Behind this noncommittal comment is Beijing’s big dilemma in the Ukraine crisis.

What is currently unfolding in Ukraine is a multifaceted political disaster for the communist government in China. On the one hand, Beijing is not happy to see another authoritarian regime—Ukraine’s previous government under Viktor Yanukovich—pushed out by pro-democracy protesters. Besides his highly unpopular pro-Russia policies, the downfall of the former Ukrainian president can also be attributed to public anger over the bloated corruption of political elites in Ukraine in recent decades. China’s communist leaders fear that should their own corruption problems be exposed in the near future they too could very well face a similar fate. On the other hand, Beijing does not approve of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s unilateral invasion and annexing of Crimea, which obviously violates China’s most cherished principle of state sovereignty. If China were to endorse the referendum in Crimea, on what legal ground can Beijing stop such a referendum from happening in its own restive regions of Xinjiang and Tibet?

For decades, the principles of sovereignty—including sovereign equality, territorial integrity, and political independence—have been sacrosanct for Beijing in international relations. Since the end of the Cold War, the communist government’s concerns over its own political legitimacy and the country’s territorial disputes have only made adherence to these principles more rigid and uncompromising. In this milieu, China’s communist leaders have, with few exceptions, opposed any form of international intervention in another state’s internal affairs. Beijing is concerned that too many precedents of international intervention will pave the way for foreign interference in its own domestic crises such as ethnic conflicts or popular protests.

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In the post-Mao era, the communist leaders’ foreign policies have served the overriding needs of domestic politics. From Deng Xiaoping’s dictum of “keeping a low profile and never



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taking the lead” (*taoguang yanghui*) to Jiang Zeming and Hu Jintao’s “peaceful rise” (*heping jueqi*) to international prominence as a responsible great power, their foreign policies have been characterized by deliberate restraint and modesty in order to create a friendly, accepting international environment for China’s economic development. Since Xi Jinping became China’s top leader in 2012, many Western powers and Asian states have taken note of Beijing’s growing assertiveness in its foreign policy and defense policy. Besides its eye-catching development of blue-water and space warfare capabilities, China has become hawkish in handling its territorial disputes with Asian neighbors. Many wonder if China’s rise, under Xi’s rule, will indeed be peaceful.

Foreign policy, whether hawkish or dovish, is an extension of domestic politics. The Xi administration’s noncommittal position in the Ukraine crisis can only be explained by grave concerns about the fallout from Ukraine’s unfolding democratic revolution and the potential negative impact of the Crimean referendum on China’s own escalating ethnic tensions and growing domestic protests. The civil unrest in Tibet prior to the Olympics in 2008, combined with an ever increasing number of self-immolations by Tibetans in protest against the communist government continues to garner international attention.

There has also been an increased emphasis upon Uighur “terrorist” actions within China. The killing of 29 people in Kunming’s central train station by a group of knife-wielding Uighurs in early March is a continuation of this narrative. Moreover, large-scale popular protests launched by ordinary Chinese citizens continue to grow in frequency, scale, and duration, and sometimes result in violence. These escalating ethnic tensions and growing popular protests underlie the fermenting political crises that Xi must address at some date in the future. The question is when and how.

Although not siding with the Kremlin publicly, the Xi administration did not point fingers at or apply pressure on it during this Ukraine crisis. In contrast to the West’s condemnations and sanctions, Xi’s noncommittal stand is appreciated by President Putin. Addressing the Russian parliament on March 18, Putin said, “We are grateful to the people of China, whose leadership sees the situation in Crimea in all its historical and political integrity.” Xi may sympathize and even admire Putin’s unwavering resolve to defend Russia’s core interest. Likewise, Beijing has been feeling growing pressure from the Obama administration’s military rebalance toward Asia and its unfavorable position on China’s territorial disputes in the region. However, as a pragmatic policy maker, under no circumstances could Xi agree with Putin’s annexation of Crimea through military intervention and a flawed referendum. Such approval would only open a Pandora’s Box for China.

Based on his remarks and policies in the last 18 months, Xi has shown himself to be a tough-minded and pragmatic foreign policy advocate. He is committed to China’s reform and opening-up agenda, he talks up his desire of pursuing the strategy of win-win cooperation in international affairs, and more importantly he has shown great resolve to uphold China’s core national interests. What then can one learn about Xi’s foreign policy from his response to the Ukraine Crisis?

First, Xi is eager to build his domestic support by drumming up nationalistic discourse and advancing China’s core national interests via shrewd manipulation of power politics. Second, Xi wants to be a calculated, strategic, and clear-headed foreign policy leader. A Chinese proverb—often cited by Xi—says “A true man should do what he ought to do, and not do what he should not do.” Third, Xi understands that his foreign policies must serve the communist government’s paramount objective—safeguarding the Party’s domestic political legitimacy and maintaining the country’s social stability (*weichi wending*), which are two sides of the same coin. China’s response to the crisis unfolding in the Ukraine is Xi’s attempt to simultaneously balance these fundamental domestic factors.

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