



Ukraine: the view from China

by Camille Brugier and Nicu Popescu

With every new major international crisis – be it the Arab Spring, the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, recurrent emergencies in Africa, or the current Ukrainian-Russian tensions – it does not take long for diplomats and observers to start wondering ‘what does China think?’. It is increasingly frequent during such crises for China to be put in the spotlight and expected to articulate a position on events and regions on which, until recently, Chinese opinions were barely worth a footnote. This is also true for the Crimean crisis. A few days into the crisis, the Russian foreign ministry announced that the Chinese and Russians shared ‘broadly coinciding points of view’ on the situation.

Looking to China for reassurance is driven by many factors. The rise of China as a global power is just one. China is often seen as a sort of ‘swing’ power, capable of tipping the political balance between entrenched political warriors whose preferences are already well known. On a crisis like the one in Crimea – which elicits completely different narratives from Russia, on the one hand, and the EU and US on the other – the Chinese are seen by some as a potentially less subjective or biased source of opinions. In this sense, China’s reaction is not always predictable. After the 2008 Russia-Georgian war the Chinese maintained a stance of public politeness towards Russia but, in private, were clearly against the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia – thereby helping Central Asian countries resist alleged Russian pressures to recognise the independence of those entities.

Hence the rush by Russia to claim Chinese support for its actions in Ukraine – in a bid to claim greater legitimacy for its military invasion of a post-Soviet state. However, the claim that China is on Russia’s side is spurious.

China and the EU

The Chinese approach to the situation in Ukraine is driven by competing pressures. Its overall approach to the post-Soviet space is quite similar to that of the European Union as it is based on two equally important pillars: an evident desire to have good relations with Russia and a strong interest in not seeing the resurgence of a Russian empire and in supporting the independence of post-Soviet states. The difference here is that, for the EU, the Eastern Partnership states are of primary importance while, for China, the Central Asian countries are. In this respect, Brussels’ and Beijing’s interests and views regarding the post-Soviet states are both close and complementary. China would also like to see Central Asia become a higher priority for the EU – and it has been in principle favourable to the EU’s Association with countries like Ukraine.

Even their toolboxes are not dissimilar in that they mainly rely on political dialogue and economic integration. The EU offered Russia and other post-Soviet states trade integration. Russia has *de facto*, although not formally, rejected the offer which has been on the table for over a decade. China



made a similar offer: it proposed the creation of a Free Trade Area within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, but Russia has refused that too. And now China is suggesting the creation of a 'Silk Road Beltway' through Central Asia as a vehicle for economic integration.

In both cases, Russia refused to go along with EU and Chinese initiatives, preferring to launch its Customs Union. The problem is that the Russian-led Customs Union would complicate the existing trade relations between the EU, China and the post-Soviet countries. This is not irrelevant since the EU is the biggest trading partner for Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan – while China is the biggest trading partner for Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

As is the case for the EU approach to Russia, it is not uncommon for China's dual objectives (having good relations with Russia and supporting the independence of post-Soviet states) to clash each and every time Russia tries to assert its influence through economic, political or even military coercion. The Chinese think the crisis in Ukraine is a 'headache'. It creates new problems in their relations with Russia since they cannot say either yes or no to their request for diplomatic support.

China and Ukraine

The Chinese strongly disapprove of the Russian military intervention in Ukraine at several levels. Russia is an opportunistic supporter of the principle of state sovereignty: it resists military or political interventions in Kosovo, Iraq, or Syria, but practises such interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, while piling up pressure on other post-Soviet states. China is more consistent in its respect of sovereignty as it does not support or practise open military interventions, although it can still be tough with its neighbours.

Russia's easy recourse to military means of power projection is also worrying for the Chinese with regard to Central Asia. It is not unimaginable that a country like Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan might face a messy succession struggle once their ageing presidents have left the political stage. The question from a Chinese perspective is therefore: if such an intervention can take place in Ukraine, why should it not happen in Kazakhstan, too, provided there is a pretext for that?

There also are a number of Ukraine-specific reasons for China to be less than enchanted with Russia's military behaviour. To begin with, China has just

engaged in a \$10 billion project to build a deep-water port in Crimea, the function of which would be to redistribute cargo flows from the East to Europe. Any uncertainty in Crimea thus affects this project, especially in the event of a *de facto* secession.

China has also had a general preference for Ukraine to have closer links with the EU. The Chinese are inclined to think that Ukraine was moving closer to the EU, even under Yanukovich. They believe that the main debate within Ukraine was on how fast – and Yanukovich was in favour of a slower path. Yet, the direction towards closer relations with the EU seemed clear for the Chinese. In fact, a Ukraine embedded in a free trade area with the EU and with an improved business climate could offer extra advantages to Chinese business, especially if the new 'Silk Road' project takes shape. Ukraine would then give China a direct inland access to the European market.

On the other hand, while the strategic objectives of China overlap significantly with those of the EU, Beijing strongly rejected the tactics of the Ukrainian revolution. On that, China's view is much closer to Russia's: the overthrow of an autocratic regime by popular protesters is not something it condones. And Yanukovich's attempts to suppress the Kiev revolt Tiananmen-style were also unlikely to provoke Chinese ire. Just like Russia, China hoped the 21 February agreement between the opposition and the President, giving him a lease of political life until December, would hold. Suspicion of US meddling is another factor bringing Russian and Chinese tactical views of the situation closer to one another.

China's attitude can be summed up as sympathy with European strategic interests in the post-Soviet space coupled with sympathy with the Russian assessment of the tactics of the revolution. But none of this is likely to be expressed in public. The China-Russia relationship is hidden under a much thicker layer of smiles, politeness and hypocrisy than the Russia-EU relationship – which often slides into impolite and 'frank' exchanges.

Chinese President Xi Jinping, over the phone with American President Obama, has 'urged for a political and diplomatic solution to the Ukrainian crisis', according to XinHua news agency. However, Chinese interests in Eastern Europe remain too small for Beijing to take an open and vocal stance – at least for now, and as long as Russia's aggressive actions do not reach into Central Asia.

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