

Assessing the responses of the Chinese media and research community to the Ukrainian crisis¹

By Chris Alden

■ Executive summary

Assessments of the official Chinese reaction to the crisis in Ukraine have focused primarily on China's abstention in the vote on a UN Security Council resolution condemning Russian actions and, to a lesser degree, on the three-pronged Chinese proposal for addressing the crisis. However, by examining an array of Chinese sources, including media reports, editorials, and research think-tank publications, a number of viewpoints are presented that provide a better sense of the scope of Chinese thinking on the subject. These concentrate on the notion of Chinese neutrality, Western interference, the domestic sources of the Ukrainian crisis, and possible policy options available to Chinese decision-makers. Understanding these provides a more nuanced understanding of Chinese reactions to the Ukrainian crisis and its possible significance for China.

The onset of a cascading series of crises in Ukraine over the last few months, culminating in Russia's annexation of Crimea and the current turmoil in eastern Ukraine, holds serious implications for the international system on a number of levels. Beginning with the unexpected reversal of the decision by Viktor Yanukovych's government to sign a wide-ranging partnership agreement with the European Union (EU) in February 2014, three months of domestic turmoil were followed by an armed secessionist movement in Crimea, a dubious referendum process on March 16th and the formal absorption of Crimea soon after by Moscow, with the result that the crisis and Russian responses to it have overturned the geography, policies and expectations of the region. For China, one of the five permanent UN Security Council members and a traditionalist on questions of sovereignty, events in Ukraine pose a range of complex problems and difficult policy choices.

The Chinese government has attempted to present a consistent position in framing its approach to the crisis. At the UN Security Council, the statements by the Chinese representative, Liu Jieyi – following his country's abstention on a resolution that endorsed Ukraine's territorial integrity

and declared the referendum illegal – called for a three-pronged approach to resolve the crisis. China called firstly for the creation of an "international coordinating mechanism" to address the political settlement of the crisis; secondly, for a commitment by all parties to avoid actions that would further exacerbate the crisis; and, finally, for the start of financial discussions aimed at restoring economic stability to Ukraine. Throughout the crisis the Chinese Foreign Ministry has echoed its familiar opposition to sanctions against Russia, whether in the form of the threat of such sanctions or their application to specific targets. Equally, Beijing has reiterated its affirmation of support for the principle of the sovereign integrity of nation states, while emphasising its concern that the crisis had been fomented by "external interference".

Beneath these official reactions lie undercurrents of a more nuanced and complex set of reactions to the Ukrainian crisis and its possible significance for China. An array of Chinese sources, including media reports, editorials, and research think-tanks publications, have presented a number of viewpoints that provide a sense of the scope of Chinese thinking on the subject. Sinologists

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believe that these reflect at least opaquely debates in policymaking circles that offer a broader perspective on Chinese debates on the Ukrainian crisis, while also revealing policy preferences and arguably even societal sentiment. At the same time, given the political sensitivity of China's position and policy response to the Ukrainian issue, the views expressed in these public commentaries on the crisis do not stray too far from the party line and generally align with the government position. The following themes can be identified.

Neutrality. The background of Sino-Russian relations needs to be considered in assessing the official, publicly aired reactions to the crisis. According to scholars, there is an understanding that neither government will publicly criticise the other's foreign policy. President Xi Jinping's call for a separate Asian security structure during the recent joint Sino-Russian military exercises, coupled with greater cooperation in technology development and transfer and even outer space, is cautiously characterised by some analysts as ushering in the beginning of a major strategic realignment. Beijing has consistently and painstakingly avoided taking an overt and unequivocal stance on the Russian annexation of Crimea, while it has consistently refrained from joining the West to criticise Russia's military manoeuvres in Ukraine and oppose the dismemberment of that country. But neither has Beijing taken any stance that might be seen as directly supportive of Russia's annexation of Crimea. China's official pronouncements on the Ukrainian issue reflect the ambiguities of the Chinese attitude, arguably demonstrating Beijing's reluctance to make a definitive judgement about the situation.

Criticising Western interference. Chinese commentators universally criticise the West for instigating the unrest in Ukraine. They suggest that the Ukrainian crisis is an outcome of deliberate interference on the part of the U.S. and EU to instigate regime change by manipulating Ukrainian populism and encouraging internal confrontation and fragmentation in the country. Secondly, the loss of Crimea is an outcome of a serious strategic miscalculation on the part of the West, while Russia's policy response is a defensive reaction to counteract Western attempts to encroach on the country's strategic space. The West should have learned the lessons of the Georgian war in 2008, i.e. that it should never ignore Russia's feelings, underestimate President Putin's resolve or attempt to change the strategic balance in Eastern Europe. Thirdly, the West is practising double standards by blaming Russia for its armed intervention in Ukraine and for encouraging the independence of Crimea. The West is hypocritical and its policy is guided by geopolitical interests, not humanitarian concerns, despite its overtly moral stance.

The domestic origins of the conflict. There is a general consensus among Chinese writers that domestic sources are as important as foreign interference and geostrategic factors in explaining the Ukrainian crisis. Ukraine is inherently a fragmented nation with deep ethnic, religious

and cultural divisions, and the crisis merely brought this national identity crisis to the fore. The country's political institutions are weak, perpetuate domestic infighting and foster an unhealthy political culture that features radical populism, intolerance and extremism. The frequent changes in government and the constitutional system since independence indicate the failure of Ukraine's democratic transition and the weakness of its model of governance.

Implications of the Ukrainian crisis for Chinese foreign policy

There is not much reflective discussion on China's policy towards Ukraine and the Ukrainian crisis. Niu Jun of the School of International Relations at Peking University believes that China's foreign policymakers misjudged the situation in Ukraine. Beijing signed a series of important agreements and business deals with the Yanukovych government in late 2013 in terms of which China repeated its commitment to support Ukraine on questions of sovereignty (even pledging to extend security guarantees to Ukraine if the latter were threatened or under nuclear attack). Moreover, Niu Jun believes that if China continues to align itself with Russia, Beijing is likely to lose its room for manoeuvre. If Moscow is emboldened by its success in Crimea and pushes ahead with its expansionist agenda with scant regard for China's normative adherence to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in other countries' domestic affairs, the dilemma China has experienced over the Ukrainian crisis would not be the last one it has to face.

However, from other perspectives, China is set to gain from the crisis, because intensified confrontation between Russia and the West in the Eurasian theatre will increase China's strategic importance to Russia and render the U.S. rebalancing strategy in the East Asian theatre more difficult to sustain. An opposing view is that the U.S. East Asia strategy will not be altered by events in Ukraine and intensified rivalry with Moscow, and that Washington will continue to invest its strategic resources in East Asia and the Pacific region.

Three policy options for China

Keep a low profile. One mainstream view is that China should keep a low profile, maintain its neutrality and adopt a posture of non-involvement. The country has no capacity to intervene and there is no need for it to meddle in the Ukrainian situation. With regard to Chinese policy towards the new regime in Kiev, some writers argue that China should not rush into recognising the new Ukrainian government, because to do so would be tantamount to admitting the legitimacy of Western interventionism and the revolution against the Yanukovych government. Regarding China's policy on the status of Crimea, some suggest that it could adopt an ambiguous position similar to that on the question of the independence of Kosovo. Furthermore, China should avoid taking an open position

on Crimea's status because of anti-secessionist concerns, while concurrently avoid criticising Russia, lest it should offend Moscow and jeopardise the strategic partnership. For these analysts the Ukrainian crisis has no direct bearing on China and an equivocal stance is therefore regarded as the best option.

Oppose secession. The second strand of opinion suggests that China should take an unequivocal stand to oppose the Russian annexation of Crimea and any form of secession. They argue that anti-secessionism should be the overriding priority and is more important than Sino-Russian relations, and that Beijing would be able to gain Moscow's understanding of this position.

Support Russia. The third type of voices are in favour of a pro-Russia stance and emphasise the importance of supporting Russia in the crisis for the sake of preserving and enhancing China's strategic partnership with that country. Those of this view believe that China should avoid criticising Russia and must not support the Western position on the Ukrainian question. They believe that to support Russia is to support China itself, since Russia is China's only significant strategic buffer against U.S. and Western pressure.

Finally, there are different Chinese views on the specific question of whether China should mediate in the crisis between the conflicting parties and foreign powers. A few writers suggest that China could play a more active mediating role. However, the more dominant view is that the country has neither the capacity nor sufficient incentives to become involved. The proponents of this view believe that the problems underlying the Ukrainian crisis are already too complicated to allow China to play a successful mediating role. China has to be aware of the potential risks of being dragged into a situation where, should the power struggle intensify and escalate out of control, Beijing might be forced to choose between supporting a Russian or Western approach. Moreover, the developments in Crimea might encourage more secessionist movements in other parts of Ukraine, exacerbating the policy dilemma faced by Beijing. In fact, the current situation is already awkward enough and a prudent policy option is to keep away from such problems. If China is not cautious, the argument goes, its reputation as a responsible power could easily be damaged. ■

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