



Ukraine from the Chinese perspective - from cautiousness to pragmatism

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The aim of this paper is to give an overview of opinions on the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, from the Chinese perspective. I have considered in my research the official statements from the government, articles from state media, views of columnists, think tanks and, to some extent, the general public. Due to the ever-changing nature of the crisis in Ukraine, these positions have evolved from descriptive to discussions regarding China's involvement in the situation and whether or not it would be wise for them to lend Russia a helping hand, in light of western sanctions.¹ The Chinese stance has traditionally been „non-interfering“ and “周边是首要、大国是关键、发展中国家是基础” (zhoubian shi shouyao, daguo shi guanjian, fazhan zhong guojia shi jichu). This roughly translates to, “China’s policy in the countries in its close vicinity are of greatest importance, the great powers are the key, and developing countries are the base.” These policies have kept the country on the side-lines from the beginning of the crisis. For instance, China abstained from the (UN) General Assembly Resolution 68/262 vote on the Crimea referendum. Officially Chinese Premier Li Keqiang has said that “China has always respected the national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine”.² Similar views were expressed by China's representative at the United Nations: China is supporting a “political solution” for the crisis and hoping to settle differences through dialogue and negotiations.³ On the other hand, as the effects of the crisis are beginning to affect China, it is thinking more actively about its place in the international community and its actions here forward.

Underlying reasons for the crisis

Most of the political elites agree that, to some extent, the roots of the situation are traceable back to an internal unstable political situation in Ukraine, cultural differences between Eastern and Western parts of country, and an unfortunate geographical situation. Opinions can be divided into three groups: those who see the West as an aggressor, those who see

¹ 卢布危机——中国该不该出手俄罗斯 <http://v.ifeng.com/news/world/201501/016187fc-1300-4597-a5f0-6d025e9b3fdb.shtml>

² 李克强会见乌克兰总统波罗申科 http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-01/22/c_1114082932.htm

³ 中国代表呼吁各方对马航MH17航班坠毁事件调查予以配合和合作 http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-07/18/c_126771323.htm

Russia as an aggressor, and those who tend to see Ukraine's internal problems as the root for the crisis.

Those who sympathise with Russia see Ukraine as a birthplace for Slavic nations, a part of Russia's core interests, and see that Russia is not willing to accept growing Western influence over the Ukraine. Sun Zhunagzhi, Russian expert at China's Academy of Social Sciences, holds that cultural and historical differences between Eastern and Western parts of Ukraine are part of the problem. Other problems include limited trust for politicians in Ukraine (from general public), illusions about the Western political system (separation of three powers (三权分立 san quan fenli), and multiple party systems that have failed to guarantee stability and control local oligarchs. Double standards (双方标准 shuangfangbiaozhun) used by Western powers while handling the crisis (treating pro-Western and pro-Russian powers with different approach), have deepened the conflict. Methods used by opposition party for gaining power are seen as illegal, but supported by Western countries. Ukraine can be seen as an integral part of Russia and key geopolitical area, and if the United States wants to weaken and control Russia, it definitely has to separate the two countries.⁴ The "Ukrainian tragedy" can therefore also be seen as a struggle between global powers after the Cold war. The USA is increasing sanctions against Russia and the West is demonizing (妖魔化 yaomohua) Russia to bring it under the post-Cold war political order dominated by the West.⁵ On the other hand, Russia is heavily invested in its Eurasian Economic Union plan and is unlikely to back down, although the Crimean annexation has affected the Russian economy.^{6,7}

Zhang Hong, Russian and Eastern Europe deputy analyst at China's Academy of Social Sciences, sees the crisis in Ukraine as a result of the European Union's geopolitical expansion towards the East, bringing former Soviet Republics under its economic and political system. For him, ousting Yanukovich didn't only change the previously existing political situation, it also forced Russia to take action, as the Ukraine is not only a buffer-zone for Russia, but also a cradle of its nation's origins. Western values and security systems are being imposed globally and now have crept under Russia's door, making them a concrete threat. Zhang believes that the situation in Ukraine is showing that the American-led political system is being challenged and NATO's credibility is being tested. The West is not able to cope with the changing world order's shifting balance of power and the current crisis is the first proof.⁸

Famous commentator on military affairs, Song ZhongPing, sees the Ukraine crisis as a result of NATO's continuous expansion towards the East and thinks that the European Union has been reduced to a shield for NATO, being wielded by the US. As NATO has had no "real purpose" in the recent years, it has created a crisis in order to advance its influence eastward and that aggression is similarly being felt by China, as NATO is making inroads towards Asia.⁹

⁴孙壮志：乌克兰危机的历史根源和走势分析<http://www.cpsec.cn/kczz/jgbg/2015-01-20/a3477.shtml>

⁵扶危济困是中俄战略协作伙伴关系应有之义<http://opinion.haiwainet.cn/n/2014/1222/c353596-21572975.html>

⁶孙壮志：俄罗斯提欧亚联盟计划 遭西方打断 <http://v.ifeng.com/news/opinion/201412/01c64599-65cd-400d-a16e-27fde402255f.shtml>

⁷孙壮志：俄罗斯命运在克里米亚发生变化 <http://v.ifeng.com/news/opinion/201412/01d54239-2d0c-40ff-900a-72817a16afae.shtml>

⁸张弘：乌克兰危机周年思考<http://comment.cfnisnet.com/2014/1128/1300018.html>

⁹美俄博弈乌克兰是否会改变世界政治格局<http://v.ifeng.com/news/opinion/201501/011efc30-ac24-44e3-8b2d-79ef4f006279.shtml>

Wang Hai Yun, former military attaché to Russia and a former People's Liberation Army general, currently a high level advisor for China International Institute for Strategic Studies, regards Ukraine as a core interest for Russia and the crisis in Ukraine has all the characteristics of "colour revolution" which the Western powers and the USA instigated. In his opinion, Ukraine is being returned back to Mother's embracing arms (as Russia's inherent territory) and the new Ukrainian government can be considered as an illegal government.¹⁰¹¹

In addition to these pro-Russia thinkers, the State media has made a case that blind and overnight implementation, as well as Western style democracy, which does not take into account current conditions and cultural influences of the specific locality, will only bring about destruction and will inhibit the process of modernisation. They conjecture that Ukraine is "not ripe" for copying a Western democratic political form of government.¹² Generally speaking, the State media depicts Putin as a strong leader with courage to oppose Western powers and who enjoys high approval ratings in Russia.

On the opposite side stands the group that believes Russia's aggression has split up the Ukraine, or at least helped to create conditions for that to happen, by expanding its influence over Central Asia and Baltic region. Columnist Lian Qingchuan believes that Yanukovich knew the risks of Russian domination and wanted to reduce Putin's influence over Ukraine's politics by starting negotiations with the European Union. For him, Putin's aggression in the Ukraine is not the first of its like in the area. He sees similarities with Russia's previous situation in Georgia. Naturally, the Ukraine is extremely important to Russia and is seen as a natural security screen (天然屏障 tianran pingzhang). Although there are internal economic and political problems in Ukraine, at least 1/3 of Ukrainian people in the Eastern areas live under the constant fear of Russia. Although, while living in most dire conditions, they are somewhat sentimentally attached to the old Soviet idea of "equality".¹³

Political analyst on Russia, Fang Liang, believes that Putin has definitely sent Russian soldiers to Ukraine, violating international law and Russian internal laws; describing Crimean situation, he uses the word annex (吞并 tunbing). He sees Ukraine as an important area to Russia, for carrying out its imperial ambitions. In his opinion, Putin has also violated agreements reached during the cease-fire talks and has used this opportunity to advance further.¹⁴ Zhao Chu, the deputy director of the Shanghai Institute of Defence Strategies, sees the crisis in Ukraine as a result of Putinism (普京主义 pujiang zhuyi). According to Putinism, besides taking an active part in global affairs, Russia asserts its power on former Soviet countries (such as Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan) using historical relations, as well as economic, political, and military means, in order to protect its special status. The Russo-Georgian crisis, in his opinion, is the manifestation of Putinism. Accordingly, countries like Ukraine have chosen pro-West policies out of fear for Putin and Russia.¹⁵

¹⁰ 中国不必急于承认乌克兰新政府 http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2014-03/4869449.html

¹¹ 克里米亚与中国历史问题非一回事 http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2014-03/19/c_126286408.htm

¹² 人民日报谈乌克兰局势：警惕民主陷阱下的治理失灵 <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2014/02-28/5893680.shtml>

¹³ 夹缝中的革命 <http://dajia.qq.com/blog/365393131052029>

¹⁴ 方亮：“困兽”普京应对西方制裁 http://www.21ccom.net/articles/world/qgqc/20140930114082_all.html

¹⁵ 赵楚：普京主义的高峰与退潮 http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2014-03/4935088.html

Hong Yuan, expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, believes that the internal political struggle in Ukraine has turned into external fight and the problem can be solved by major global powers (mainly Russia and USA).¹⁶ A similar view is being held by others who can be described as the “middle camp,” or analysts who tend to see the conflict as an internal struggle in the Ukraine and has later become an international crisis.

Zhao Long, member of the Russian and Central Asia Centre at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, sees one of the reasons for the conflict being that the oligarchs control the local economy and politics. Problems could be solved if Ukraine finds internal balance and a proper way to position itself between Russia and the European Union without one-sidedly resisting either power. Peace also requires Russia and the Western powers finding a common ground.¹⁷ Gu Xiu Dong, a special contributor for **China** Institute of International Studies, believes that internal forces in Ukraine are lacking mutual trust and an insufficient amount of common aims between different political forces. That is also making it challenging for the West to mediate between different forces. Internal struggles cannot be resolved unless external forces find a solution between themselves. As Europe is feeling the effect of Russia’s countersanctions and is forced to take into consideration its own economic situation, there may be a difference in its strategy towards Russia (compared to the USA), giving Russia some space for maneuvering.¹⁸ Yang Cheng, deputy director of Russia center at the East China Normal University, holds that an unstable Ukraine is beneficial for Russia, as long as it is “controllable instability”. Because, since the end of 2013, there have been 5 or 6 “colour revolutions” taking place in former Soviet Republics, Putin will not compromise on the Ukraine. Yang also describes Putinism, saying that its special characteristics are (but are not limited to) highly concentrated state power, leader worshiping and creating a powerful nation/country.¹⁹

Feng Yujun, the head of Russia department at the **China** Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (or CICIR, a think tank attached to the Ministry of State Security), sees the situation in Ukraine as a natural historical process after a major empire has collapsed. Similar after-empire effects with regions with potential conflicts were produced after the Ottoman Empire collapsed. He accepts different views of the Ukrainian Government, Russia and EU/NATO, in regards to whom is/was the antagonist, but adds that Russia’s strategy is to create friction between EU countries and also between the EU and NATO, similar to his conception of their strategy in Syria. He thinks that a comprehensive solution between major powers, and also solving internal problems in Ukraine, will be needed in order to put an end to the conflict. It’s not enough to have USA and Russia behind the table. If some sort of agreement can’t be reached soon, there is a high probability that Ukraine will move closer to NATO. He thinks that although Russia should be worried about potential revolutions in its

¹⁶乌克兰危机：俄罗斯会不会强行西进 <http://v.ifeng.com/news/world/201502/01e8f369-d9f0-42ee-8b2f-5b641c6fc3c4.shtml>

¹⁷重建平衡：乌克兰“甜蜜”未来的关键 <http://www.siis.org.cn/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=22&id=498>

¹⁸欧盟不甘心做乌克兰危机牺牲品 http://www.ciis.org.cn/chinese/2015-02/10/content_7681067.htm

¹⁹“普京主义”的社会基础与 2012 年总统选举之后的俄罗斯政治生态发展趋势
<http://euroasia.cass.cn/news/2012/03/540290.html>

periphery, the best way to avoid these is to raise living standards of the people and to create a more just system, based upon the rule of law.²⁰²¹

There are different views on how the situation in Ukraine will affect NATO's activities in Asia and a US rebalancing strategy. Some analyst think that the crisis in Ukraine is shifting NATO's focus more towards Europe, leaving less resources for Asia. Others see that the Ukraine situation has proven that the Western powers are "paper tigers" and their power is diminishing. Some hold that, precisely because US-led NATO is concentrating more on Asia, it has limited interest in dealing with Ukraine, in turn placing more responsibility on Europe.

China's role

As noted before, China has officially tried to distance itself from taking an active role in solving the crisis, stating that it hopes that the solution will be found via dialogue between relevant parties. China's UN representative put forward a three-point proposal on a political solution. The proposal included: establishing, as soon as possible, an international coordinating mechanism consisting of all the parties concerned, for the purpose of exploring means to a political settlement of the Ukrainian crisis, all parties refraining from taking any action that may further escalate the situation, and international financial institutions starting to explore how to help maintain economic and financial stability in Ukraine.²² At the same time, China abstained from the UN draft resolution, which condemned referendum and legitimizing the transfer of Crimea to Russia.

Zhang Hong and Hong Yuan agree that China can affect the situation via UN Security Council membership, but according to Zhang, it can't have a decisive (决定性 *juedingxing*) effect. Wan Cheng Cai, from Xinhua Centre of World Issues, thinks that, as China is not directly involved with the crisis, as there has been no request for China to mediate, and as four out of five UN Security members are already participating in the dialogue, China's participation would be useless. Fang Yujun points out that China is supporting Ukraine in its decisions and reiterates that China's position has been constant throughout the crisis. As China has no ability to bring together all the participants, there is no major role to play for China.²³ Jiang Shi Xue from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has taken cautious approach and thinks that in many cases, it's better to calmly stand aside, as the crisis in Ukraine will add more variables to China's external environment.²⁴ Yang Cheng thinks that China — which is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and keeps close relations with Russia and good ties with the European Union, the US and Ukraine — can help ease the crisis.²⁵

Although the aspect of referendum doesn't get much attention in discussions, possibly due to China's own concerns over Hong Kong or Taiwan, popular Tianya forum has a topic that calls China to not give tacit consent to the referendum and says it should clearly say "No" to accepting the results. Abstaining from UN resolution vote will have a negative impact on

²⁰乌克兰危机：俄罗斯会不会强行西进<http://v.ifeng.com/news/world/201502/01e8f369-d9f0-42ee-8b2f-5b641c6fc3c4.shtml>

²¹美俄博弈乌克兰是否会改变世界政治格局<http://v.ifeng.com/news/opinion/201501/011efc30-ac24-44e3-8b2d-79ef4f006279.shtml>

²²http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2014-03/16/c_126272170.htm

²³乌克兰危机：俄罗斯会不会强行西进<http://v.ifeng.com/news/world/201502/01e8f369-d9f0-42ee-8b2f-5b641c6fc3c4.shtml>

²⁴江时学：不要误读乌克兰危机http://cass.csn.cn/xueshuchengguo/guojijianjiuxuebu/201403/t20140307_1022752.html#

²⁵http://www.chinadailyasia.com/news/2014-03/17/content_15125188.html

China's foreign policy and, this time, China should go with the international community and oppose Russia's direct and indirect interference with another country's politics.²⁶ On the other hand, former PLA general Wang Hai Yun thinks that it's in China's interest to support the referendum results as Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet are all "China's children" that in a similar way (to Crimea-Russia relationship) belong to motherland. Although Russia is China's strategic partner and both countries should support each other, China is simply holding up the international law by complying with the outcome of referendum on Crimea's independence.²⁷

Sino-Russian cooperation

Despite China's non-interference and non-alignment (不结盟 bu jiemeng) policy, as western sanctions are having effect, oil and the rouble are losing value, there is an active debate going on about what form of assistance, if any, China should lend to Russia, as they are actively looking east to substitute their former energy market and reinvigorate their economy. China has already signed two gas deals with Russia in 2014, as well as a currency swap agreement for 150 billion yuan, and it seems to be warming up to Russia's "proposals." In August the state run Xinhua newspaper ran a story called "Russia is looking East, China welcomes new opportunity for cooperation," citing Russia's interest in developing Far Eastern coal, oil, gas and agricultural industries with China. China has expressed its intention for cooperative efforts, its hope for normalization of railway operations, and its will to expand cooperation in the transport sector.²⁸

Many observers think that although Russia's economy had structural problems well before the sanctions were implemented, an opportunity has arrived for diversification, especially in terms of cooperation in the Far East, and the inevitable outcome will be a better relationship between Russia and Asian/BRICS countries.^{29,30} More radical opinions hold that Western powers might think that sanctions will make Putin to surrender his demands, but nothing could be further from the truth, as sanctions are mobilizing the great nation, giving it more power to resist.³¹ Xinhua news portal quoted The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, saying they believe Russia will be able to overcome temporary hardships.³² More responsibility is being put on Russia's shoulders by others, who agree that Russia needs China's technology, capital and market to develop, but it's up to Russia itself to be able to manage the situation. Some would say that Russia's use of its traditional strategy, to balance the west with the east, by strengthening and reviving relations with different countries, will not have instantaneous results.^{33,34}

²⁶<http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-4199332-1.shtml>

²⁷克里米亚与中国历史问题非一回事http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2014-03/19/c_126286408.htm

²⁸俄罗斯“向东看”：中国迎来合作新机遇 http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-08/28/c_1112269022.htm

²⁹俄罗斯多管齐下 苦“练内功” 应对西方制裁http://big5.news.cn/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-08/08/c_126849080.htm

³⁰卢布危机——中国该不该出手俄罗斯 <http://v.ifeng.com/news/world/201501/016187fc-1300-4597-a5f0-6d025e9b3fdb.shtml>

³¹俄罗斯民众为何力挺普京：大国意识根深蒂固http://military.china.com/news2/569/20150227/19328226_all.html

³²外交部：我们相信俄罗斯有能力克服目前暂时的困难http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-12/18/c_1113697065.htm

³³卢布危机——中国该不该出手俄罗斯 <http://v.ifeng.com/news/world/201501/016187fc-1300-4597-a5f0-6d025e9b3fdb.shtml>

³⁴俄罗斯何时冬去春来——“危机政治经济学” <http://magazine.caijing.com.cn/20150202/3813238.shtml>

Sun Zhunagzhi, from the Chinese academy of Social Sciences, thinks that to “help those in peril” (扶危济困 fuweijikun) should be the basis of Sino-Russian strategic cooperation. Under this premise, their relationship would not be affected by Western powers and the two parties would expand cooperation in the financial, transportation and technology fields. The partnership would be based upon mutual trust, equality and be mutually beneficial for both of the economies in the future. He uses the saying “crossing the river in the same boat” or “keeping together in times of trouble” (同舟共济 tongzhougongji)³⁵, the same wording that China’s Premier Li Keqiang used in the end of 2014, when giving the first hint about China’s willingness to help Russia in troubled times.³⁶ China’s foreign minister has made similar statements, saying that the Chinese-Russian strategic partnership is “functioning at high levels” and that the two countries are supporting each other through hard times. If Russia needs, China is willing to provide help, within its power (力所能及 lisuonengji).³⁷ He also held a press conference in the beginning of March, to describe China’s diplomatic goals for 2015. According to him, the China-Russia relationship is not dictated by international vicissitudes and does not target any third party. Thanks to the strong strategic trust the two sides have established, the relationship has become more mature and stable. Practical cooperation between China and Russia is based on mutual need, seeks win-win results, and has enormous internal impetus and room for expansion. The two countries will work hard to lift two-way trade to US\$100 billion and will sign an agreement to work on the Silk Road Economic Belt.³⁸

As Xi Jinping has been actively promoting its “one belt, one road” (一带一路 yiluyidai) strategy or Silk Road Economic Belt, which makes Shanghai Cooperation Organisation an extremely important platform, the political and economic stability of every member seems to be a key to success (It should be noted that in Central Asia, Russia can be seen as a competitor and partner for China at the same time.) As China has become one of the biggest trading partners for Russia, changes in the rouble and Russian economy will also be felt by China. The “one belt, one road” strategy would be particularly affected.³⁹ Several papers have presented stories saying China-Russia relations have reached new historical highs and the two countries have joined hands to create new a Shanghai Cooperation Organization that excludes western influences and has a mutually beneficial effect, even describing it as the new world order.⁴⁰

It also didn’t go unnoticed by Chinese observers that Japan was the least willing to impose recent sanctions on Russia and that their relationship has changed quite drastically, which was pointed out by Asia-Pacific centre analysts at the Shanghai Institute for International studies.⁴¹ Sino-Russia relations on the other hand have been improving during past years marked by frequent Xi-Putin meetings and the crisis in the Ukraine has opened up new opportunities for cooperation, pushing the two countries closer. Although, at the moment, the cooperation seems to be concentrated mostly on the economic front. In general, there seems to be strategically common viewpoints between the two leaders and a willingness to put aside

³⁵扶危济困是中俄战略协作伙伴关系应有之义<http://opinion.haiwainet.cn/n/2014/1222/c353596-21572975.html>

³⁶王毅：如果俄罗斯需要 中国会在力所能及范围内协助http://www.guancha.cn/Neighbors/2014_12_20_303961.shtml

³⁷王毅：中国会向俄罗斯提供必要协助http://news.ifeng.com/a/20141220/42761360_0.shtml

³⁸外交部长王毅就中国外交政策和对外关系回答中外记者提问http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1243647.shtml

³⁹卢布贬值殃及中俄经贸http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2014-12/18/c_127314171.htm

⁴⁰中俄携手共塑世界新秩序<http://finance.jrj.com.cn/2014/09/29010818095975.shtml>

⁴¹乌克兰问题激化日俄关系 <http://www.siis.org.cn/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=22&id=535>

potential problems in Central Asia. China's new initiatives, like BRICS Bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with 21 signatory- countries, and "one belt, one road," require cooperation from regional powers, as well as stability in Central Asia.

The improvement of the China-Russia relationship, as seen through these initiatives, is pragmatic and there will probably be more intense diplomatic coordination between the two countries in the coming future. On the other hand, China is not handing out a proverbial "free lunch," as is demonstrated by: the time required for recent negotiations and the still unsettled pricing for a potential gas deal, China's continuous diversification of its energy import sources, and more assertive politics (奋发有为 *fenfa youwei*) in Central Asia and improving Sino-US relations. China's own "rebalancing strategy" in Asia versus America's "pivot to Asia" has also made a strong case for stronger Sino-Russian cooperation, as a part of wider web of bilateral and multilateral interactions.

Conclusion

Although officially China has chosen not to "take sides" on the conflict in Ukraine, has maintained its non-alignment policy, and respected the national sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Ukraine, there is wide variety of opinions from various social and political players about who was to blame for initiating the conflict. There is also a wide variety of opinions on what China's position should be in going forward. Although China's official position was predictable, its reaction to Western sanctions on Russia seems to be at odds with Western tactics. Seen through recent political and economic initiatives by Xi Jinping though, China's actions are in accordance with his policies in other surrounding countries.