

# Russia Clash Over Ukraine: China's Stake in the Conflict and Outcome

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## ABSTRACT

Through its Asia Pivot Policy, USA has been focusing on Asia as a part of its grand strategy and maintains a conflictual relationship with both China and Russia – with its ambition of becoming a hegemonic player in Asia. The Ukraine Crisis has been dubbed as opportunity for China in its ambition to counter both US and Russia which can be ascertained from the various developments –which raises the imperative to research these developments. This paper seeks to research how China is popularly viewed as the winner in Russia's clash with US and west over Ukraine. It looks at how This conflict does not leave Beijing unscathed, especially when it comes to the China's own defense modernization plans and future security cooperation with Russia. The Paper analyses how both Ukraine and Russia contribute to the development of the underdeveloped military industry of China that makes Ukraine an important partner of China. Further we will see how the USA's focus on Ukraine due to Russia is also making China a suitable mediator in the ongoing crisis. This paper concludes that the China's stake in the Ukraine crisis will help in creating a safety valve and deescalating the situation over Ukraine

**Key Words :** Asia Pivot Policy, Ukraine Crisis, Sino-Russia Relationship, US-Russia relationship, Safety valve

## INTRODUCTION

The Economic Sanctions of the West on Russia after the Ukrainian Crisis brought the two nations Russia and China, in a relationship that might have a gross impact on the interest of the world order in Asia. Before going on to the detail on the issue, we have to see China's history and Russia's Relation. The History of Sino-Russia Relations divided into prominently 3 phases. From 1989 to 2000, the First began with the normalization of Sino-Soviet ties after the Cold War and ended with Putin's election. Second, from 2000 to 2008, was two presidential terms. From 2008 to 2014, the Third includes both the presidency of Dimitry Medvedev and the first two years of Putin's third term. After the end of the cold war, Sino-soviet ties normalized. Still, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the relationship between Russia and China

paused as both countries had their priorities and preferences in following their policy. Russia was having economic difficulties, state-building and the Chechen war. In contrast, China was trying to attract foreign investment to develop its export-driven Economy while maintaining state control in crucial sectors. Political cooperation between the two countries limited only to the regional issues that led to the First Summit of the "Shanghai Five" in 1996, including China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. But in subsequent years, China has developed so much that the dependence on Russia has decreased. In 1993, China was Russia's second-largest trading partner. Still, by 1994 it had fallen to tenth place, making Russia less critical.

The 1990s formed an excellent time for the Defense relation between Russia and China, especially in Arms Transfer matters in sophisticated weapons. After the

disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia had lost its main customers to its sophisticated weapons and the arms trade restriction imposed on China by the West after the Tiananmen Square massacre made their partnership of utmost importance. In the 1900s, China formed the most significant arms trade partner of Russia, which led to Russia's struggling Military plants and helped Russia survive the economic downturn followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Chinese share in the Russian Defense Industry varied from 30 – 50 % in the 1900s. But in the 2000s, Russian arms faced tough competition from Chinese arms, which was nothing but the copycat of Russian weapons that Russia sold to China. The Chinese practice of Reverse Engineering made the Russian policymakers develop a sense of hesitation in selling their most sophisticated and advanced weapons to the growing Chinese Military. China's Financial dominance and global military reach will eclipse that of Russia. Simultaneously, the US's strength will continue to rest on its mass investment in defense and fervent obligation to consumerism.

The range of activities that overtook Ukraine in late 2013 and have continued thereafter constitute perhaps the most serious crisis in international relations since the end of the Cold War. It all started as a domestic event which rather quickly turned into one with regional and international implications. At the moment the Ukrainian crisis involves all the leading players in the international arena – Russia, USA, OSCE and NATO. Indeed, nearly all major countries, including China, have responded each in its own way to the events unfolding in Ukraine.

### **Strategic Balance :**

China's invigorated policy towards Ukraine stands on a firm conceptual foundation. Its leaders believe that Ukraine can serve as China's 'prop' on the western edge of the Eurasian expanse, with Kazakhstan as a 'prop' on its eastern edge thereby the two countries together giving China balance in its relations with other CIS countries. The whole idea of China with respect to Ukraine is the "one-shaft two-props" strategy where Russia is a key country in a central shaft role with Kazakhstan and Ukraine are major props in the Eurasian region that keep China in balance and make it stable by covering its western strategic flank (Qiang, 2013).

The Whole Ukrainian crisis brought a new side of the China in international affairs as its strong belief in Non-Intervention and Respect for International law. Its

proof is that China has refrained from recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia after the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 for the very same reasons despite Russian attempts to convince China to do so.

### **China - Ukraine Relations :**

The two countries have found a common ground in the spheres of economics, politics and Geopolitics in recent years. Ukraine and China established diplomatic relations on January 4, 1992. By the time the crisis broke out in Ukraine in 2013, relations between Ukraine and China had reached a relatively high level with a framework for strategic partnership and cooperation in place. In 2011, their relationship comprised over 200 agreements including in many key areas such as trade and military industrial exchanges (Guzenkova and Karpoy, 2017).

In late 2011, China became Ukraine's top trading partner among Asia Pacific region countries and in 2012, bilateral trade stood at \$9.783 billion overall, with \$1.858 billion in Ukraine's exports to China and \$7.924 billion in imports from China to Ukraine. These figures placed China second among 217 countries that Ukraine was. Trading with. In 2013, Ukraine's trade with China showed an upward trend pushed by both imports and exports. The two countries agreed on raising their trade to \$20 billion by 2015.

Ukraine and China substantially expanded cooperation between enterprises of their respective military-industrial complexes (MIC). China has been keeping his eye gawking upon the strategic resources in Ukraine that will fuel its military needs. In fact, in recent years, China has been the biggest customer of the Ukrainian MIC's output. For example, in 1998 Ukraine sold to China for US\$25 million that half-finished aircraft carrier, Varyag, which has been in construction since 1985 at the Nikolaev Shipyard, originally for the Soviet Navy. After being completely rebuilt and undergoing sea trials, the ship was commissioned as China's first aircraft carrier, Liaoning. On 25 September 2012, it became a part of the Peoples Liberation Army Navy. Ukraine has concluded with China a number of contracts on military technology construction and sold to China about 30 military technologies (Mokretskiy, 232-253). In some ways Ukraine has provided the critical military technology that Russia has been reluctant to transfer.

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There are also many joint investment projects, and many with a specific local flavor have been developed in recent years. For instance, in 2009, the two countries and their companies entered into talks on the construction of a circular highway around Kiev and bridges across the Dnieper. Chinese companies were eager to sign on these projects. The talks were soon followed by an agreement on the construction of a high-speed railroad between Kiev and the Borispol International Airport. In 2013, there was news that China was considering a lease of around 3 million hectares of farmland from Ukraine for a term of 50 years. At the first stage of the lease project, Chinese state – owned Xinjiang Production and Construction corps was planning to take on a lease of 100000 hectares from the Ukrainian KSG Agro holding in Dnepropetrovsk, Kirovograd and Kherson regions and the Crimea Autonomous Republic, where the leaseholders wanted to build several irrigation systems to bring water to the lease areas. In the Longer term, Ukraine was to become the biggest overseas producer of food crops for the Chinese population.

Furthermore, in 2014, China and Ukraine agreed on joint efforts to undertake within the framework of SILK ROAD ECONOMIC BELT project under China's BELT AND ROAD initiative, comprising a program to develop a CRIMEA SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE that was to include, in the first place they want to build a deep-water port in Saki district of Ukraine. Ukraine and China also agreed to modernize and expand the fishing seaport at Sevastopol and establish a high-tech industrial zone around it, as well as to build an airport, a shipyard, an oil refinery, a liquified natural gas terminal, education centers,

beaches and recreation areas in Crimea. The project was to be completed by 2018. The SILK ROAD ECONOMIC BELT also supports Ukraine's plans to be integrated into Europe. This aspect of China bonded the relationship between China and Ukraine in a whole new way and reached its pinnacle when it was mentioned by the Ukraine's Ambassador to China in December 2013, "As an utterly civilized country, China takes calmly what its friends and partners do elsewhere .... China has a stake in seeing Ukraine in Europe because once Ukraine is there it will serve China as a gateway to Europe".

The two countries maintained cultural relationship at the bilateral level. Ukrainian Cultural Days were held in China in 2010 and were reciprocated with Chinese Culture Days in Ukraine in the following year. Both events involved officials and professionals and included performances by touring troupes on both sides. Countrywide competitions for Chinese language learners have been in Ukraine and several Confucius Institutes operates on its territory.

Bilateral ties between Ukraine and China have been encouraged by official contacts between their top leaders. Victor Yanukovich, Ukraine's president made his first official visit to Beijing in September 2010. The same thing happened when Chinese President Hu Jintao made a state visit in June 2011 followed by a second visit of the Ukrainian President in December 2013. The relationship had reached a far high level which can be confirmed from the words of China's President Xi Jinping, during which Xi called Yanukovich a great friend of the Chinese People. 'You have made a positive contribution to the strategic partnership and friendship between our peoples. I appreciate this immensely,'. As a result of these visits the leaders of China and Ukraine decided to expand their strategic partnership between their countries in Areas such as Agriculture, power Industry, Infrastructure, Finance and High Technologies. They also agreed to continue cooperation in science, education, culture, healthcare travel and tourism, sports and people-to-people contacts. The two leaders of China and Ukraine through their dealings gave top priority to close interaction in International and Regional affairs, promotion of new International Political Order, Countering global challenges and protection of common interest (Renmin Ribao, 2013). Both the countries signed the Treaty of Friendship and cooperation thereby incorporating the basic principles of strategic partnership between them. They also signed a joint declaration to further their relation in more practical

areas that will carry their relation to a whole level.

### **Ukrainian Crisis: China's Stake:**

In 2014 with the coming of the Ukrainian crisis especially the fall of the Yanukovich regime, it casts a shadow over the many projects and plans which were the outcomes of closer China and Ukraine Relations and many of the projects were located in the Ukraine and also in the Crimean Peninsula and the crisis throws China's prospects into jeopardy. Initially China kept a very low profile and made no strident statements on the crisis in Ukraine and shunned any diplomatic initiatives. Although to the outside world China silence and non-involvement was kind of a good reaction in the prevailing world order but in reality, China kept a watchful eye on the situation evolving in the country of Ukraine. Officially China cleared its stand that China had no intention of interfering in Ukraine's domestic politics, that it respected the will of Ukraine's people and was ready to keep up the friendly dialogue and cooperation. The various reaction of Chinese officials to the international media such as "interested forces in Ukraine can resolve the conflict through Consultations and join together to maintain social unity and stability". China believed that international community can play a constructive role in helping them to achieve their goals.

China had significant ECONOMIC STAKE in Ukraine that initially drove its leaders to look for an opportunity to make contact with the new Ukrainian authorities in the hope that the men and women who had just come to power would rubberstamp the agreements signed by their predecessors. Chinese leaders as well as the Chinese ruling Elite remains conservative, trying not to make any sudden moves and seeks to preserve the existing order and prevent revolutionary turmoil, very soon, Chinese official stand towards Ukraine become more and more Anti-western and also closer to the viewpoint of Russian Federation. China criticized Western leaders for their interference in the domestic politics in Ukraine by supporting the Anti-government protesters that cast a serious blow to the Ukrainian Democracy thereby complicating the regional affairs (Xinhua, 2015). The Chinese XINHUA NEWS AGENCY had criticized western leaders and asked them to keep its hands off the domestic affairs of a Sovereign Nation. China also opposed the western work of 'fanning confrontation' and 'instability in the region' leading to the pulling up of Ukraine into European Union's embrace, in an open

challenge to Moscow. This western meddling had halted independent dialogue between the government and opposition, planting the seeds of future social and political division in the nation. Russia's position in this whole crisis is support for the Ukrainian authorities acting in the name of the former Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovich, condemnation of the antigovernment protests and accusations against the west and above all, Russia believes USA of being responsible for the situation in Ukraine. This Created a difficult situation for China as it is hard for it to maneuver in geopolitical sense, with the only option left for him is to support and stand by Russia. This is because in recent years both China and Russia have viewed the United states as their chief competitor in the world and have sort of developed into a Soft Alliance (Alexandar, 2015) and challenging the west in many cases unitedly such as Nuclear program in Iran and North Korea, Conflict in Syria.

### **Ukrainian Crisis : China's Advantage:**

In this whole Ukrainian Crisis, China certainly realizes that the chief protagonist of the global 'Battle of Ukraine'-Russia, EU and the USA- are vying for support from China for their policies. This rivalry is nearly exactly a replay of the Cold War in the 1970s when the USSR and The United States were each playing the 'China card' and looking for ways of having China in their own camp. Their rivalry today can nicely play into China's hands as it did then.

While staying away from the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, China can make the most of the bitter differences dividing Russia, EU and the USA over the Ukrainian Crisis. By placing itself right between the rivals engaged in a tug-of-war, China can put its extraordinary geopolitical status to good use, ramping up significantly its role in today's international relations gaining much in weight as a global geopolitical actor and ultimately seizing the chance to project its influence forcefully on world affairs.

At the same time China by sticking to its position of non-intervention in the internal affairs of a country will create a goodwill for China. While China may well lose out in Ukraine with Russia's intervention, it could nonetheless win greater influence in other regions namely Central Asia who views Russia's actions worryingly. Beijing may face skepticism from local populations in these states but it could be viewed as the lesser of two evils and importantly, a state that at least pronounces

non-interventionism. Indeed, with the US and EU deemed to be weak and unwilling to counter Russia, China may be increasingly a preferred partner for these states. Chinese Relations with the central Asian states will therefore likely receive a new boost as a result of the Russian Intervention in Ukraine.

### **Crimean Annexation: Chinese Position:**

In the Run up to the Russian annexation of Crimea on March 18, 2014, China condemned in strong words the acts of violence that have been involved and reiterated its previous view that China believes in the principle of non-interference in Ukraine's internal affairs and respected its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. This Act of Russia creates some kind of uneasiness in the minds of China as well as Central Asian States who might think about what Russia intend to do next beyond Georgia and Ukraine. indeed, Russia's assertive policy could very well logically extend to Central Asia—a region which Russia considers as its "backyard" and one in which it has legitimate interests (Swanstrom, 2014). This is not least true in Kazakhstan which is home to a large Russian Minority. China has a large vested economic and political interest in Central Asia that could also be threatened if Russia decides to increasingly assert itself in the region.

Another reason for China in its strong Anti-Crimean position is it's the characteristic of Separatism in its which China is facing in its own backyard. The Separatism in its own country that happens from time to time made China oppose the violence and fight in Crimea. This Reaction of China seems to be predicted as going against its ally Russia but it soon turned out to be the other way. This can be said as China like all the G-7 member and other western countries did not demand for Russian withdrawal from Crimea and Ukraine immediately. This tells us about the double standard of China but at the same time a trusted ally of Russia. China in the UN Security Council took a very awkward position on Ukraine and Crimea. In the UN China did not back Russia and also did not support the USA thus neither criticizing its partner but at the same time did not support the western idea of punishing Russia for the Crimean Annexation. With Russian using Veto power and China abstaining the resolution was defeated in UN Security Council.

### **Conclusion:**

From the above discussion we can say that in the

Crisis in Ukraine, China continued to give the impression of standing on neutral ground and every time its response in view of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is like an evasive fudge. China traditionally maneuvered to occupy neutral ground, even in harsh international disputes. But China's Neutral stand on Ukraine and Crimea is really more comforting to Russia than to the west led by the United States. Geopolitical reasons above all forced China to swung gradually towards Russia as both shared the same Geopolitical goals and they responded strongly to attempts by the United States along with western countries to force their attitudes on other countries, has led to this shift.

China was pushed into Russia's tighter embraces by circumstances such as the problem of its own disputed territories on which the United States takes a fairly tough stand such as Taiwan, South China Sea. The Force drawing China and Russia closer together under the effect of the Ukrainian Crisis may also have to do with the definite economic interests, as well as geopolitical underpinnings. According to the western experts predicts a significant beneficial economic fallout to China of the Ukrainian crisis and the imposed sanctions imposed against Russia by the west. This Situation created by the Ukrainian Crisis will force China and Russia into isolation which creates a favorable ground for Russia to shift its export of Energy resources to China and at the same time China would turn in to the biggest exporter of commercial products to the Russia Market.

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