

UKRAINE: AND THE WINNER IS . . . CHINA

By Artyom Lukin



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There is one international player that stands to gain from the recent turn of events in Ukraine, regardless of its outcome. This player apparently has nothing to do with the crisis, which has engulfed Russia, the EU and the United States, and makes a point of staying on the sidelines. The country in question, of course, is China.

The leadership in Beijing must be secretly delighted watching the struggle between Russia and the West. The Ukraine mess can seriously poison Moscow's relations with Washington and Brussels for a long time to come, thus reducing their mutual ability to coordinate policies on the major issues in world politics. One such issue, perhaps the most important, concerns geopolitical risks associated with China's rise and its impact on the global economic and military balance.

Up to the present, Russia has pursued a relatively balanced and circumspect policy toward its giant Asian neighbor. Although the Chinese side recently has signaled that it would welcome closer strategic ties with Russia, even a security alliance perhaps, Moscow so far has been reluctant to transform their current "strategic partnership" into a full-blown geopolitical entente. In particular, Russia has not been ready to back Beijing's assertive stance on the various territorial disputes in East Asia.

Political and economic sanctions, now threatened against Russia by the West, will inevitably push Moscow toward Beijing, increasing the likelihood that the sides will align their policies toward the West. This, in turn, will reinforce the Middle Kingdom's strategic positions in Asia. Having acquired Russia as a safe strategic rear area, as well as privileged access to its vast energy and minerals base and advanced military technologies, China would feel far more confident in its rivalry with the United States for primacy in the Asia-Pacific. For one, just watch Putin's visit to China in May. The Ukraine events are likely to finally clinch a Russia-China gas pipeline deal long delayed by haggling over the fuel price. Western sanctions will certainly make Moscow more compliant with Beijing, landing China a bargain which will provide it with a stream of cheap Siberian gas.

China's response to the recent developments around Ukraine is telling. Ever since the crisis began to develop last fall, the Chinese media have tended to blame the Western meddling for what was happening there. After Russia took over Crimea and declared its readiness to use military force, the PRC's Foreign Ministry blandly urged "the relevant parties in Ukraine to resolve their internal disputes peacefully within the legal framework so as to safeguard the lawful rights and interests of all ethnic communities in Ukraine."¹ Discussing the crisis with Putin, China's

¹ <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t1133558.shtml>

President Xi Jinping remarked, somewhat enigmatically, that “the situation in Ukraine, which seems to be accidental, has the elements of the inevitable.”² So far there has been no sign whatsoever of Beijing’s condemnation of the Kremlin’s moves in Crimea and the rest of Ukraine. China’s official press commentary is sympathetic with Moscow, stressing that Putin’s determination to protect the interests of Russia and Russian-speaking citizens is “quite understandable.”³ Many of China’s netizens blogging on the websites like *Weibo* have displayed admiration for Putin’s defiance of the West.

Beijing’s abstention at the UN Security Council vote on Crimea can hardly be interpreted as opposition to Russia. In fact, Beijing has made it quite clear that it disapproves of using the UN stage to pressure Russia, with China’s foreign ministry commenting that the Security Council’s vote on the draft resolution prepared by the United States “will only lead to confrontation among all parties, which will further complicate the situation.”⁴

What really matters is China’s willingness to go along with the sanctions against Russia. However, there is zero probability that Beijing will support any political or economic penalties on Moscow. In terms of international diplomacy, such a stance by China can be interpreted as nothing other than benevolent neutrality toward the Kremlin. One may suspect that, in exchange Beijing would expect from Moscow the same kind of “benevolent neutrality,” for example, regarding its actions in East Asia and the Western Pacific.

In the 1990s, Zbigniew Brzezinski likened Eurasia to a grand chess board, emphasizing the geopolitical interconnectedness of various parts of the supercontinent. That metaphor is now even more relevant, with Eurasia being geopolitically interdependent more than ever. What is now occurring in Ukraine and around it will inevitably affect the games being played out on the opposite side of the board, if only because the players are oftentimes the same. This is well understood by some American strategists, who worry that, excessive pressure from the West “may alter the geopolitical balance by putting Russia closer to China.”⁵ However, Washington has not still made up its mind as to who is America’s top geopolitical competitor in this grand chess game – Russia or China?

When the US enjoyed its “unipolar moment” in the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s, Washington could easily pursue a dual containment policy – against both Russia and China. Since that time, the balance of power has changed significantly. Now America is hardly in a position to confront two great powers in Eurasia simultaneously. Americans have to decide which region is more important to them – the post-Soviet Eastern Europe (whose heart is constituted by Ukraine) or East Asia. The choice may be unpalatable, but indefinitely postponing it will have consequences. Today engaging Russia in the uncompromising battle over eastern Ukraine, the US may, in ten or fifteen years from now, pay the price of losing East Asia.

It is a cruel irony that the Ukraine crisis should have broken out at the year of hundredth anniversary of the First World War. That war was triggered by the mess in the seemingly insignificant Balkans. To continue with the pre-World War I analogies, Russia’s current stance toward Crimea and eastern Ukraine is reminiscent of how, in the late 19th and early 20th century, Austria-Hungary felt about the Balkans, which it deemed its vital sphere of influence. The fear of losing control over the Balkans drove Austria-Hungary into the embrace of Imperial Germany, even though Vienna and Berlin had traditionally vied for control of Central Europe and fought a war in 1866. The alliance of Germany and Austria-Hungary contributed to Europe’s splitting into two camps and eventually the general war. Sino-Russian relations, of course, have been historically complicated, but this may not preclude them forming an entente, as long as they perceive the common adversary. Hopefully, the current Ukraine situation will not result in war, but it can well become a major step toward transforming the international order into a confrontational bipolarity, with the US-led West facing a Sino-Russian axis. The Western push to “isolate” Russia may prove self-defeating. Rather than forcing Moscow to withdraw from Ukraine, it will draw it closer to Beijing.

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² http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-03/05/c_133160618.htm

³ <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90777/8552726.html>

⁴ <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t1137754.shtml>

⁵ <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116837/dmitri-simes-interview-why-russia-isnt-taking-us-seriously>