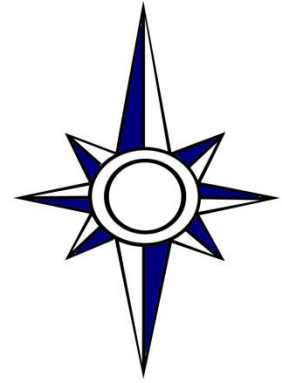


Comparative Connections

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China-Russia Relations:

“‘Western Civil War’ Déjà Vu?”

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The Sochi Olympics and the Ukraine crisis tested the upper and lower limits of the China-Russia strategic partnership relations in the early months of 2014. While the Olympics infused new dynamics into the relationship, the turmoil in Ukraine, which British Foreign Secretary William Hague defined as the “biggest crisis” to face Europe in the 21st century, is still escalating. “The smoothest invasion of modern times” (BBC’s reference to Russia’s annexation of Crimea), which was over before the outside world realized it had even started, is being met with waves of Western sanctions against Putin’s Russia. Despite Kiev’s “anti-terror” operations in Ukraine’s east and southeast, pro-Russian militants are now controlling 23 cities – and counting – in Ukraine’s industrial heartland, home to over a third of Ukraine’s GDP. The current crisis is frequently analogized in the West as a replay of the Nazi 1938 takeover of Sudetenland or the Cold War 2.0. For Russia’s strategic partner in the east (China), however, there is little space to navigate between Russia, the EU, and Ukraine. Welcome to the brave new world of Beijing’s neutrality with Chinese characteristics.

To Sochi, and not just for sports

Relations between Russia and China were on the fast track at the beginning of 2014. In January, a week after the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced President Xi Jinping’s decision to join the opening ceremony of the Sochi Winter Olympics, Russian Ambassador to Beijing Andrei Denisov said in a press conference that President Vladimir Putin would visit Beijing in May. A regular and frequent exchange of high-level visits by top leaders has become institutionalized over the past decade. In 2013, Putin and Xi met four times: at the BRICS Summit in Durban, South Africa, the G20 Summit in St. Petersburg, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Bishkek, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Economic Leaders Meeting in Bali.

The two announcements for 2014 (Xi’s trip to Sochi and Putin’s China visit in May) came at a time when the Sochi games were facing multiple and growing challenges. One was the serious questioning of Sochi’s security following two bombings that killed 34 people in Volgograd on Dec. 29-30, 2013. Sochi, which is less than 700 km from Volgograd, is even closer to North Caucasus, Russia’s persistently restless region that includes Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Chechnya. Xing Guangcheng, a leading Russia specialist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who had traveled many times to Sochi prior to the games, considered Sochi’s security situation to be “uncertain.” Xi’s Sochi trip, therefore, was not without security risks, even from the Chinese perspective. China, however, was prepared to bet on Russia’s antiterror experience. As Chinese commentator Xiao An (晓岸) stated, “It is unthinkable if the Chinese leader is absent from Sochi when help is needed, precisely when China and Russia share similar perspectives in areas of

domestic reforms, national restoration, regional stability, curbing Japan's historical revisionism, promoting rise of new forces, countering West's political arrogance and opposing hegemonism,."

Aside from these bilateral and strategic considerations, the Japan factor was also in play in the decision to make the trip to Sochi. Several days before the Chinese Foreign Ministry announcement, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide disclosed that plans were being made for Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's trip to Sochi to attend the opening ceremony, but that nothing had been finalized. Japan "disclosed" Abe's plan to visit Sochi at a time when the two East Asian giants were waging a diplomatic war of words around the world about interpretations of history in the 20th century. More than 40 Chinese ambassadors took to the public space to denounce Japan's version of the Rape of Nanjing, the comfort women system, Yasukuni Shrine visits, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute, etc. It is unclear if Xi's decision to go to Sochi was driven, at least partially, by Tokyo's disclosure of Abe's travel plans. Tokyo, however, never hid its intention for a higher-than-China profile in Sochi. A Japanese government official remarked, upon learning about Xi's attendance that, "China must have made the decision in rivalry with Japan." For Abe, his Sochi trip would create a more favorable environment for progress in relations with Russia, both in resolving their territorial issues, and hopefully some strategic intimacy with Moscow as a hedge against a rising China.

Meanwhile, President Putin made a strong overture to China three days before the announcement of Xi's visit. Speaking Jan. 17 to a press conference, Putin said that "China is a great country with great culture" and that the "Chinese are interesting, hardworking, and wise." For Russia, both Asian powers were highly valued guests in Sochi given that leaders from most major Western countries were planning to skip the event, notably including Barack Obama, David Cameron, François Hollande, and Angela Merkel, in protest of Russia's human rights record, Edward Snowden, Syria, etc. Good relations with the two most powerful Asian nations not only broadened Russia's geostrategic clout, but also positioned Moscow in a favorable and "commanding," if not indispensable, position between Beijing and Tokyo. Even without Sochi, improving relations with Tokyo had been a policy goal of Moscow's own Asia-Pacific "pivot." A more "balanced posture" in Asia would serve multiple purposes: to connect Russia with the most dynamic economies of the world, to bring badly needed economic inputs to the Far Eastern part of Russia, and to correct its China-heavy and Japan-light posture.

The Chinese media described Xi Jinping's decision to join the Sochi opening ceremony as "the first major and correct foreign policy decision for 2014" (重大且正确的外交决策) for both Sino-Russian relations and Eurasian geopolitics. This was also the second consecutive year that Xi made his first visit abroad of the year with Russia as the destination. "As two world-class powers on the fast track for internal transformation and development, China and Russia have unlimited common interests and willingness to cooperate," said Feng Shaolei (冯绍雷), China's top Russia specialist and dean of the School of International Affairs in Shanghai's prestigious East China Normal University. Xi's Sochi visit "will certainly be of special meaning for the Russian people," said Ambassador Denisov, who went on to say that the two heads of state "will synchronize watches" on "a wide range of issues in bilateral relations and on the international agenda."

President Xi, perhaps more than any top Chinese leader, is known for his passion for sports and seemed determined to be the first top Chinese leader to go abroad for a major sports event like the Olympics. Xi's Sochi trip had another goal, or dream: to launch the bidding for China to host the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing-Zhangjiakou. If successful, Xi will be in his last year as China's top leader (since Deng, Chinese top leaders usually stay in office for two five-year terms). "We are here to learn from the Russian people, Russian athletics and success story of Sochi in holding winter Olympics," Xi told a Russian TV reporter a day after his meeting with Putin in Sochi. Both are strong leaders at home, having emerged from traumatic times, and determined to make their respective countries strong and respected in the world. Sports are just one of many common denominators for these two leaders.

Of the 40-some foreign leaders at the opening ceremony in Sochi, Xi was the first to meet Putin. Indeed, Xi's visit "will certainly be of special meaning for the Russian people," said Ambassador Denisov. In comparison, Putin's lunch meeting with Abe, which took place two days after the opening ceremony, was somewhat more personal as Abe was greeted with Putin's dog "Yume," a Japanese Akita, which Abe brought as a gift during his visit to Russia. During the Putin-Xi meeting, they "reached new important consensus while planning and making deployment for the development of China-Russia relations," according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry. Xi first congratulated Putin on the Sochi Olympics saying that "The Sochi games are a symbol of how Russia is heading toward strength and prosperity." The meeting covered a wide range of issues including Ukraine, Korea, Syria, economics, military sales, and World War II commemoration in 2015. Xi also welcomed Russia to participate in the development of China's newly launched Silk Road Economic Belt, which links 24 cities from eight countries in Central and West Asia.

During the meeting, the two sides reiterated their commitment to jointly commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of the World War II in 2015 – an occasion that has become increasingly sensitive in Asia due to Japan's recent efforts to reinterpret its wartime past, including repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, and the denial of "comfort women" and of the Nanjing Massacre. In a separate interview with Chinese TV journalists, Putin revealed how he spent his 61st birthday with Xi just a few months before (October 2013) during the annual APEC meeting in Bali: "... we drank a little vodka together and even had sandwiches like university students," recalled Putin.

Unlike other summits, however, there were no documents to sign and no joint communique was issued. Xi and Putin jointly held video talks with captains of Chinese and Russian naval vessels escorting ships carrying Syrian chemical weapons. Chinese Capt. Li Pengcheng and Russian Capt. Peshkurov briefed Xi and Putin on their missions, authorized by UN Security Council Resolution 2118. The Chinese and Russian naval vessels had completed the first two escort missions for the Norwegian and Danish cargo vessels carrying chemical weapons materials on Jan. 7 and 27 to a specially fitted US ship for on-board destruction.

The joint video conference sent a strong message that Beijing and Moscow would pursue more policy coordination in regional and world affairs, as was the case in Syria. Several times in the past few years, Russia and China either blocked or watered down sanctions proposed by Western nations in the UN Security Council, leading eventually to the soft-landing of the Syrian chemical weapons crisis in late 2013. "China and Russia should from this day forward continue deepening

our consultations and cooperation on major international issues and together maintain world and regional peace, security and stability,” President Xi was quoted saying. In turn, President Putin said that Russia and China intended to make every effort to strengthen international security.

In exchange for tangible support for Sochi and Syria, China sought broad support from Russia in two areas: China’s Silk Road Economic Belt strategy, launched in late 2013, and the worsening security situation in Northeast Asia, particularly in relation to Japan. On the economic front, Putin promised to work closely with his Chinese counterpart in promoting cooperation in the areas of energy, nuclear, aerospace, transportation, and military technology. The Japan question, though, was more sensitive. Xi and Putin did manage the “Japan issue” as they decided to jointly commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. Putin was quoted as saying the crimes committed by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan should not be forgotten.

China’s Sochi logic

China’s support for Sochi was by no means driven solely by a geopolitical mindset. At least two additional factors were at work. One was the recent memory of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which was, from a Chinese perspective, seriously and unnecessarily politicized prior to the games. As if the around-the-world-Olympic-torch-relay that became China’s public relations disaster was not enough, the opening ceremony of the Beijing Games was accompanied by an annoying reprise of the “guns of August,” albeit in South Ossetia and Abkhazia along the Georgian-Russian borders. Western criticism of Sochi was therefore not convincing or justified. Putin’s Russia, for all of its deficiencies, is no Soviet Union, which was known for its ideological passion and frequent use of its vast military power.

In China’s public discourse, there is discernible sympathy for Russia’s predicament. An editorial in the Feb. 7 *Global Times* wondered why Russia was so consistently bad-mouthed by Western media when there had been no “major problems” in Russia in previous years. One conclusion to draw is that Western-style democratization may not be enough to be accepted by the West. For major countries like Russia and China, the West’s policy depends solely on its geopolitical interests. “Russia is much smaller and its relative power is no comparison with those of Stalin or Brezhnev eras,” and “it has been largely on the defensive,” said the same paper on Feb. 8. Still, media in the West were bashing and even cursing Putin’s Russia just as its forebears did many decades ago toward the Soviet Union, commented *Global Times*. Perhaps, suggested the editorial, this was the way the West has sought to settle the “final account” with Putin for his unhelpful behavior regarding Syria and the Snowden affair. The West was leading human civilization and had considerable spiritual influence around the world. Yet in the case of Sochi, the West was selfish, narrow-minded, and with little tolerance of others, continued the editorial. It warned that such a propensity by the West could give rise to a future threat. This was because “these West-centrists may not be aware that what they are doing now is affecting Russians’ reshaping their world outlook; and that they are sowing the seeds of the past conflicts into the soil deeply ploughed by globalization,” warned the *Global Times*.

In China’s diverse media environment, *Global Times* does not have a monopoly on China’s Russia policy. It is, however, relatively close to the official strategic logic behind China’s policy and enjoys considerable popular support. Despite its strong rhetoric surrounding Sochi, the

Global Times editorial tried to play down the geopolitical implications of Xi's Sochi trip. "Xi Jinping's Sochi visit by no means suggests that China opts to confront the West," stated the paper. "In fact, the combined forces of China and Russia are far weaker than those of the West. It is unwise, and ultimately unsustainable, if the Sino-Russia strategic partnership relationship is based on confrontation with the West." This was because "the West is important for both China and Russia. And closer cooperation between the two would be conducive to their respective relations with the West, which means the West would become more accommodating," argued the paper. With the rapidly deteriorating situation in Ukraine, these cautious words for a closer Sino-Russian cooperation started to be accompanied by, and contrasted with, stronger arguments for closer ties with Moscow.

Embracing the Ukraine storm and China's neutrality

Ukraine, a country of 46 million, has been torn between its Russian-speaking east and south and pro-European west. Tensions between these groups date back to the Stalinist era and Nazi times. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's unexpected independence in 1991 further distanced Ukraine from Russia's orbit, which was accelerated by the color revolution, chaotic street politics, and economic dysfunction. This culminated with the flight of Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovich to Russia on Feb. 21, two days before Sochi's closing ceremony.

Ukraine's "farewell" to Russia, however, has been as painful as its turbulent incorporation into Russia over the centuries. The reverse was perhaps also true for Russia. "The West must understand that, to Russia, Ukraine can never be just a foreign country," warned Henry Kissinger in the *Washington Post* on March 3. He noted that "Russian history began in what was called Kievan-Rus. The Russian religion spread from there. Ukraine has been part of Russia for centuries, and their histories were intertwined before then... Even such famed dissidents as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Joseph Brodsky insisted that Ukraine was an integral part of Russian history and, indeed, of Russia." Kissinger's classic realism has apparently had little effect for those on the ground as events took on a life of their own.

"The Ukrainian issue was raised at the Russian-Chinese talks in Sochi and the two leaders stressed the inadmissibility of foreign interference in the developments unfolding in Ukraine," Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov told a news conference shortly after the meeting. It was unclear what exactly Putin briefed Xi on about the rapidly deteriorating Ukraine crisis. The day they were meeting, a conversation between US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland and US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt was intercepted and uploaded to *YouTube*, presumably by Russian intelligence.

Publicizing these rather undiplomatic remarks by Nuland was widely believed to embarrass Washington and to drive a wedge between the US and its European allies. One also wonders if the appearance of this intercepted phone conversation on *YouTube* sought to impress Xi while also convincing him of the need for greater strategic coordination in dealing with the Ukraine crisis. President Putin perhaps understood that as an independent power, China had its own interests in Ukraine, which may not entirely overlap with Russia's own interests. In facing growing pressure from the West, China's support for Russia in the crisis in Ukraine was of high value for Moscow.

The Putin-Xi Sochi summit was both timely and crucial. Within two weeks, President Yanukovich fled to Russia. This was just 24 hours after Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev warned Yanukovich not to let opponents walk over him “like a doormat,” the strongest signal from Russia directly linking the end of street protests to the delivery of \$2 billion in loans (the second tranche of the \$15 billion Russian economic package to Ukraine). In another week, Russia moved to annex Crimea. The crisis in Ukraine, however, is far from over.

Beijing was alarmed by the rapidly escalating crisis in Kiev, particularly by the open and ubiquitous US and EU support for the opposition groups. By February, what was seen as an opportunity for China in late 2013 (Yanukovich’s visit to China and an \$8 billion loan package to Ukraine) was fast evaporating. So were China’s extensive interactions in the areas of military-technological connections, which has been a major source of China’s military modernization. There was, however, little China could do to help defuse the crisis because of its good relations with both Russia and Ukraine and given the escalating confrontation between Russia and the EU/US. Neutrality is perhaps the rational, or least harmful, choice for Beijing.

On Feb. 24, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said that China had been closely following the situation in Ukraine and called for the crisis to be resolved through consultation. “China does not interfere in Ukraine’s internal affairs, respects the independent choice made by the Ukrainian people in keeping with Ukraine’s national conditions and stands ready to foster strategic partnership with the Ukrainian side on an equal footing,” she said.

Putin’s move into Crimea apparently surprised China. On March 3, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson said “China is deeply concerned with the current Ukraine situation” and reiterated that China has been urging all parties in Ukraine to address their domestic disputes peacefully in accordance with the country’s law, safeguard the legitimate rights of the Ukrainian people of all ethnicities, and restore social order as soon as possible. He said China always sticks to the principle of non-interference in any country’s internal affairs and respects the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. For the case of Crimea, however, “There have been reasons for today’s situation in Ukraine,” but the spokesperson did not detail the reasons.

These unexplained “reasons” were described by a top Chinese Russian specialist as being that for China, Russia’s Crimea takeover was “illegal but understandable or justifiable” – illegal according to international laws of sovereignty, but understandable given the West’s earlier interference in Ukraine’s internal affairs while ignoring Russia’s interests. “The Chinese expressed understanding of Russia’s analysis of the roots of the deep political crisis in Ukraine and the role external forces supporting the Maidan played in it, and of the nonimplementation by the Maidan of the Feb. 21 accords on ways to settle the crisis,” the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement issued on March 3 following talks between China’s Deputy Foreign Minister Cheng Guoping and Russian counterpart Grigory Karasin in Moscow. For the same meeting in Moscow, China’s official news media had this to say:

The two sides expressed deep concern on the current situation in Ukraine, condemned the extreme violent acts in Ukraine, called on relevant various parties in Ukraine to emphasize the destiny of their own people and the nation’s fundamental interests, seek political solution to

differences within the legal framework and through dialogue and consultations, and realize *Ukraine's stability, economic development, and social harmony* (emphasis added).

Of the three goals for Ukraine in the above statement, the word “sovereignty” was missing. At the time of the Crimea takeover, the West was crying for the safeguarding Ukraine’s sovereignty while Russia insisted on the principle of self-determination. Xi reiterated China’s tacit agreement with Russia’s handling of the Crimea case when Putin initiated a telephone conversation on March 4, and Xi used a similar expression that the Crimea issue was “not from nowhere (偶然中有必然).” To balance this tacit understanding of Russia, Xi told Putin that he believed Russia would “help resolve the issue through political means and maintain regional peace and stability,” which both entrusted Putin to soft-land the crisis and avoided China’s direct mediation in the crisis resolution.

What’s to be done? China’s dilemma in the Ukraine crisis

China’s articulated neutrality, albeit not without preference, triggered a rather lively debate in China. Niu Jun (牛军) of Beijing University, for example, argued that “nobody understood” China’s publicly expressed neutrality regarding Ukraine. China wanted to support Russia, but not its military interference in Crimea; China pointed to the complexities of the Ukraine trap, but also wanted to emphasize Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. In essence, China misjudged the Ukraine situation, and thus found itself in an unprecedentedly awkward situation (少见的尴尬). Separately, a *Phoenix TV* (PRC backed) commentator in Hong Kong went so far as to say that the Russian military action in Crimea violated international law because “Russia has conveyed a clear and straightforward message that Moscow is capable of using military means to achieve political goals when dealing with international disputes. Russian military action in Crimea is an out-and-out military aggression that disrupts regional and international order.” On March 12, the more liberal *Nanfang Dushi Bao* (Southern City Daily) in Guangzhou published an article by it by columnist He Jingjun who questioned the legality behind Crimea’s referendum, and its union with Russia.

These arguments, however, were among the minority in China. A poll of 1,703 people conducted by the *Global Times* Global Poll Center on March 4 in seven cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, and Shenyang indicated that nearly half of respondents supported Russia sending troops to Crimea and roughly 80 percent supported the move as they believed it was justified for Russia to fight back against the West infringing upon its interests. Some 35 percent of respondents were against Russian troops entering Crimea and nearly 20 percent did not hold a clear stance. “Most respondents support Russia sending troops to Crimea because they have seen the disasters that Western neo-interventionism brings upon the world,” said Wang Haiyun, a former military attaché to Russia, currently serving as the senior advisor at the China Institute for International Strategic Studies in Beijing. “They are disgruntled by the chaos such interference has given rise to and don’t want to see the turmoil spill into more regions.”

At a more professional level, Russia’s successful takeover of Crimea was very much admired by the Chinese military. Yang Yucai, a professor at the crisis management center of the PLA National Defense University in Beijing, believed that Russia set an example of strong crisis management with a firm legal basis. In his op-ed piece in *Global Times*, Yang noted that “the

Putin administration's high efficiency in managing the regional crisis is impressive." This was because of the united security institution led by the Federal Security Service (FSB), a high level of strategic planning, and government agencies' strong enforcement capabilities. "In such a way, close collaboration between parliament agencies and diplomatic, military, security and intelligence organs is ensured, and the authority, consistency and flexibility of emergency policies made by Putin can be guaranteed," argued Yang. The author paid particular attention to Russia's making decisions based on law and on response plans. "This principle of acting according to the law also ensures that departments at various levels can play to their own role and make complementary decisions when necessary," said Yang. Yang concluded by saying that "Fundamentally speaking, highly efficient crisis management depends on constant buildup of security capabilities," and suggested that Russia's economic difficulties actually provided a certain sense of crisis and the spirit of hard work of the elite and the whole nation. As a result, "Russia's military and diplomatic authorities have fostered a strategic tradition of positive defense, active interference and the spirit of risk-taking. A generation of generals and strategists with great ambitions has emerged. Ordinary Russian soldiers also uphold the principle of taking active actions." Yang's assessment of Russian crisis management behavior paid less attention to Russian President Putin, who is widely believed to be behind Russia's swift takeover Crimea. Yang's assessment, however, is identical to some Western evaluations, such as those by Reuters' Peter Apps, regarding the Russian military and its performance during the crisis (see Peter Apps, "Ukraine crisis gives NATO, West few good options," Reuters, March 2, 2014; "After Crimea, Western spies, armies to up Russia focus," Reuters, April 7, 2014).

Given the obvious pro-Russian sentiment and positive assessment of Russia's crisis behavior in China, as well as China's enormous interests in a peaceful resolution of the Ukraine crisis, not-so-passive neutrality of China seemed to be the mainstream Chinese opinion on the proper policy approach for China. In an editorial titled "China Should Mediate in Ukrainian Crisis," *Global Times* argued that there is no such thing as total "neutrality." Nor should China remain "just a spectator." "If it is indeed impossible to be impartial ... China should place not making Russia disappointed ahead of not making any party disappointed," suggested the editorial. Beyond this, it is in China's interests to mediate (劝和) between various parties involved for two reasons. First, the Ukraine situation should not continue to deteriorate. Second, Russian interests in Ukraine should be recognized and respected by the other parties, and China should advise the West not to push Russia too hard in order to move toward a compromise acceptable to all parties. The paper recognized that China does not have much experience in mediating international conflict, and it may lack self-confidence to mediate between the West and Russia. Yet who is more qualified than China as a mediator now, given China's good relations with both Russia and Ukraine, as well as its large number of dialogue channels with the West?

The *Global Times* editorial offered little specifics for a more "active" neutrality approach to the Ukraine crisis. What the editorial defined seemed to be a bottom line: if there was nothing else that China could or should be doing, the current strategic partner relationship with Russia should be preserved at all cost. In other words, if China cannot save its interests in Ukraine, it should not lose more with others. China's current neutrality, or strategic ambiguity regarding Ukraine is, therefore, both an advantage and a constraint. For a large power like China with extensive interests in Ukraine, its current inability to do anything regarding the Ukraine crisis is a dilemma, although it is the least costly option if the situation in Ukraine escalates further.

In an editorial two days later, *Global Times* went further by insisting that “backing Russia is in China’s interests.” It was obviously debating with those who “think China’s policy of non-interference will be tested in this matter and that if China supports Russia, it will become ensnared in a diplomatic trap. This is the mentality of the weak. The West has interfered in the internal affairs of many countries, but never admitted it,” argued the editorial. To operationalize this proactive stance, China should stick to its neutral policy diplomatically but slightly favor Russia, which can be accepted by many countries and will pave the way for China to play a mediating role. In the words of Yang Cheng, deputy director of the Center for Russian Studies at East China Normal University in Shanghai, Beijing should adopt a “positive, facilitating gesture” that comes along with its prudence on the issue.” “It is inclusive. ... The message is that China is ... trying to play a proactive role,” Yang told the *China Daily* on March 10.

China’s domestic discourse regarding Ukraine thus gradually moved toward a more proactive posture. On March 15, when China abstained from a Western-backed UN Security Council resolution condemning Crimea’s referendum on joining Russia, PRC Permanent Representative to the UN Liu Jieyi made a three-point proposal: first, an international coordination mechanism including each party should be established to explore approaches to a political solution to the Ukraine crisis; second, all parties should not take any action that further worsens the situation at this time; and third, international financial organizations should begin to explore how to assist Ukraine in maintaining economic and financial stability.

China’s proactive, or conditioned, neutrality during the Ukraine crisis was well received in Russia. In his emotional speech on March 18 to both the houses of the Russian Parliament and the Federal Assembly, President Putin said that, “We are grateful to everyone who has treated our steps in Crimea with understanding. We are grateful to the people of China, whose leadership – [applause] – whose leadership viewed and views the situation around Ukraine and Crimea in its historical and political entirety.” Putin went on to praise India’s “restraint and objectivity.” The China factor, nonetheless, appeared to weigh more in the strategic calculus for both Putin and the audience (Russian lawmakers), as was indicated in their long and louder applause for China’s understanding.

China’s interests in Ukraine

China’s limited policy options regarding the current Ukraine crisis, however, do not necessarily mean that Beijing should be cast away for any meaningful resolution of the crisis, both in Ukraine and in Russian relations with the West. In this connection, it is useful to understand China’s extensive interests in Ukraine. First and foremost, the long-term stability of Ukraine is in China’s basic interests. This is largely driven by China’s extensive economic interests in, and cooperation with, Ukraine. China is Ukraine’s second largest trading partner after Russia (\$10.2 billion in 2012) and is the third largest market for Ukrainian goods. By 2013, China had invested \$10 billion in Ukraine across many fields including infrastructure, energy, transportation, aerospace, machine tools, chemistry, and agriculture, among others. Ukraine received another \$8 billion investment offer during Ukraine President Yanukovich’s China visit in December 2013.

A fast growing area of cooperation between China and Ukraine is in the agricultural sector. In 2012, China and Ukraine signed an agreement for agriculture cooperation. Another agreement was reached in September 2013 for China to “rent” farmland in Ukraine. According to this 50-year contract, China would eventually rent up to 3 million hectares of Ukraine’s farmland, which is about 5 percent of Ukraine’s total arable land. The land deal is of strategic significance for China given the tight ratio between China’s huge population and its extremely limited arable land (only 9 percent of the world’s arable land for 20 percent of world grain consumption). Ukraine, in contrast, has 23 percent of the world’s black-soil farmland and has long been known as Europe’s breadbasket.

Perhaps more than any other country in the world, Ukraine has played an almost indispensable role in China’s military modernization, including sale, design, and technology transfers of aircraft engines (*AI-222* for China’s *L-15* trainer), naval gas turbines (*DN/DA-80* and *UGT-25000*), diesel engines for the *Al-Khalid* tank developed for Pakistan, research and development for China’s military transportation aircraft (*Y-8*, *-9*, and *-10*), *Zubr*-class amphibious hovercraft, and the Soviet *Varyag* aircraft carrier (refurbished into China’s *Liaoning* aircraft carrier). China’s \$8 billion financial package to Ukraine in December 2013 also had significant military components. Partially because of large military sales to China, Ukraine became the world’s fourth largest arms exporter in 2012, after the United States, Russia, and China.

In contrast to Russia’s military sales to China, Ukraine has been more flexible in technology transfers, particularly in the sensitive areas of military aircraft design and production, carrier-related products (such as landing cables, for example), and hover craft (model *I2322*). In early 2014, a long *Global Times* article was titled, “China could not achieve its military modernization without Ukraine.” Over the past 20 years, China has obtained some 30 key military-related technologies from Ukraine and China has managed to get almost anything it wanted. In 2005, Ukraine provided China with a *T-10* jet, the pre-production model of the carrier-based *SU-33* fighter, to Russia’s disappointment. China also hired a large number of Ukrainian scientists and engineers from the bankrupted military-industrial complex in Ukraine shortly after the Soviet breakup. Between 1992 and 2002, China “imported” more than 10,000 such personnel from Ukraine and managed to transfer more than 2,000 military technologies. In 2006 alone, more than 2,000 Ukrainian scientists and engineers were invited to visit and/or work in China.

In the past 20 years, Sino-Ukrainian military transactions have thrived despite Ukraine’s domestic instability. Indeed, China has managed to forge a good relationship with various Ukrainian administrations regardless of their party affiliations. The current turmoil in Ukraine, however, seems to threaten the fundamentals of this mutually beneficial relationship. If Ukraine indeed fragments, or comes under greater influence of either the EU or Russia, China would not be able to maintain the same level of military sales and technology transfers. A stable and neutral Ukraine is therefore in the best interests of China.

At the geostrategic level, a stable and neutral Ukraine would serve as a buffer between Russia and the West. Both are important for China’s long-term interests and it does not have to choose between the two. Finally, Ukraine would continue to serve as an important foothold for China’s economic drive to Central Europe. Of the \$19 billion in investment and loans that China made to

Central Europe, about \$8 billion is earmarked for Ukraine. All these interests require a stable Ukraine. China's current neutrality, therefore, is perhaps the only rational approach.

Defining crisis

With the rapidly deteriorating situation in Ukraine, analysts in China started to question the West's paraphrasing of the Chinese phrase of "crisis" (危机) as "danger" (危) and "opportunity" (机) pioneered by Stanford political scientist Alexander George in the 1970s. For Beijing, George's interpretation of the Chinese phrase is by no means a mere case of "lost in translation" with elements of rewards and hope. The two Chinese characters once put together as a phrase really means "dangerous times."

After the killing of more than 100 antigovernment protesters in Kiev's Maidan in late February and the death of more than 30 pro-Russian protesters in Odessa on May 2, Ukraine had reached an "point of no return" and the country "is split in the minds and hearts of many of its own citizens," claimed Piotr Dutkiewicz, a prominent scholar of Eurasian affairs. Meanwhile, an editorial in *Global Times* warned that the real threat in the current chaos in Ukraine is that no side is able to control the situation; nor does anyone appear to have a way out. As a result, the entire situation is being driven toward an irrational end by accidental but extreme occurrences. Under these circumstances, a war in Ukraine is not to be made by any particular blueprint of the sides. It will nonetheless come because one side takes an extra step with the hope that the opposing side may blink. Such a war could be one of sheer terror because it is fused with revenge and racial rage generated by hastily armed masses. Such a war could drag on without any distinction between ceasefire and a real battle, thanks to inputs from outside forces on both sides. To avoid this worst-case scenario, Europe needs to compromise. Blowback is almost unavoidable if one party consistently overplays its power against the other side.

The pessimistic tone in the editorial was striking and it was perhaps not unrelated to some emerging trends in China's national strategy. For quite some time, Putin's suggestion to form a political alliance (政治联盟) with China was not well-received in Beijing. Months of turmoil in Ukraine and the grave danger of a much bigger conflict, however, seemed to have finally convinced many in China's foreign policy community that it is time to respond to Russia's initiative for closer political ties. On May 6, China released its first blue paper on national security (《国家安全蓝皮书: 中国国家安全研究报告(2014)》) that explicitly suggested that China pursue a strategy of "allying with Russia, reaching out to and enhancing relations with Europe, and stabilizing relations with the US (联俄、拉欧、稳美).

Despite its deep involvement in the Ukraine crisis, Washington seems rather indifferent to these creeping, but perhaps systemic, trends on the Eurasian continent. On March 4, 2014, or two days after Crimea was "quietly" taken over by Russia, the Pentagon released its 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). Curiously, this guideline for the US defense posture for the next four years has very little about Russia except a brief statement: "We will continue to work to achieve a Europe that is peaceful and prosperous, and we will engage Russia constructively in support of that objective" (page 35).

For China, and perhaps more so for Russia, the ghosts of the “total wars” of the past century are haunting again precisely 100 years after the outbreak of World War I, a four-year carnage that nearly wiped out an entire generation of European youth (10 million dead and another 20 million wounded). Worse, this “war to end all the wars” (Woodrow Wilson) turned out to be the beginning of a much bigger human slaughtering that made the 20th century the bloodiest in human history (casualties for Russia and China in World War II were 27 million and 35 million, respectively). Further escalation of the Ukraine crisis would not just restart what Samuel Huntington called the “Western civil war” (from the 1848 Treaty of Westphalia to the end of the Cold war in 1991). It may well be another step toward the worst in human history because of the overkill capacity by both sides.

Chronology of China-Russia Relations **January – April 2014**

Jan. 25, 2014: Russian nuclear-powered missile cruiser *Petr Velikiy* and Chinese frigate *Yancheng* drill together in the Mediterranean Sea after escorting the first consignment of Syrian chemical weapons from the Port of Latakia to the Italian coast. The ships practice air defense, helicopter deck exchange (landing on each other’s deck), and joint command. This is the first time the Chinese Navy has held an exercise in the Mediterranean.

Feb. 6-8, 2014: President Xi Jinping joins the opening ceremony of the 22nd Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. On Feb. 6, Xi and President Vladimir Putin meet in Sochi.

Feb. 6-8, 2014: President Xi and Czech President Milos Zeman meet in Sochi for 45 minutes. They agree to launch the Warsaw Initiative in Prague in late 2014, following the first and the second such forums in Warsaw and Bucharest in April 2012 and November 2013, respectively. The forum is a meeting for economic cooperation and includes China and prime ministers of 16 central and eastern European countries.

March 3, 2014: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has a telephone conversation with Chinese counterpart Wang Yi to exchange opinions on the situation in Ukraine. A press release by the Russian foreign minister notes that “the foreign ministers “broadly agree” on the Ukraine situation” and agree to continue to stay in close contact on the issue.

March 3, 2014: China’s Vice Foreign Minister Cheng Guoping and Russian Deputy Foreign Grigory Karasin, who is responsible for bilateral relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), hold consultations on the affairs of the CIS in Moscow.

March 4, 2014: President Putin initiates phone conversation with Xi Jinping to discuss Ukraine.

March 12, 2014: President Putin signs a law ratifying the agreement between Russia and China, easing travel regulations. It allows visa-free travel for holders of business passports for up to 30 days, in addition to existing visa-free travel for holders of diplomatic passports.

March 15, 2014: Russia vetoes a draft UN resolution criticizing the secession referendum in Ukraine's Crimea region; China abstains from the vote.

March 18, 2014: In his speech to both the houses of the Russian Parliament and the Federal Assembly regarding the Crimea referendum to unite with Russia on March 16, President Putin praises China's stance during the Ukraine crisis.

March 24, 2014: The five foreign ministers of the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) meet on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit at The Hague.

March 25, 2014: President Xi meets Foreign Minister Lavrov on the margins of the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague. They exchange opinions about the situation around Ukraine and the upcoming Russia-China contacts on the summit and high levels.

March 27, 2014: Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) holds a second expert panel consultation on antiterrorism in Beijing.

March 28, 2014: SCO Regional Antiterrorism Structure (RATS) Council holds its 24th meeting in Tashkent. The theme is consideration of regional security in the SCO area after the partial pullout of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan.

March 28, 2014: The "Chinese-Russian Youth Friendly Exchange Year" is launched in St Petersburg. Presidents Xi and Putin send special congratulatory messages.

March 29-April 1, 2014: Chinese State Councilor and Defense Minister Chang Wanquan visits Tajikistan to attend the SCO Defense Ministers Meeting on April 1. Chang meets Russian counterpart Sergey Shoygu who thanks China for supporting Russia regarding Crimea. Shoygu also expresses support for China's proposal to set up a new anti-terror center within the SCO.

March 31, 2014: Russian business channel *RBK TV* reports that President Putin has agreed in principle to sell China two to four *S-400* surface-to-air missile systems.

April 9, 2014: Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli and Deputy Premier Arkadiy Dvorkovich meet in Beijing to co-chair the China-Russia Energy Cooperation Committee. Dvorkovich meets State Councilor Yang Jiechi the following day.

April 15, 2014: Foreign Minister Lavrov makes a working visit to Beijing and is received by President Xi.

April 17-19, 2014: Chinese Vice Premier Wang Yang visits Russia for the chairmen meeting of the Joint Commission for the Regular Meetings of Chinese and Russian Prime Ministers. The meeting is also to prepare for Putin's visit to China in May.