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The Ukrainian Crisis as a Case Study of Different Policymaking Styles of Russia and China

Abstract: The Ukrainian crisis of 2014 has been a popular theme of journal and media articles for obvious reasons. Its “Chinese”, or rather Sino-Russian dimension has been less so, though the Chinese reaction to the Ukrainian crisis and the implications of this reaction represent interesting political phenomenon. This article tries to fill this gap and uses the description of Russia and China policies during the crisis as a case study of Moscow and Beijing political behavior on the international scene in general. Its thesis is that the Ukrainian crisis represents a great case study of these behaviors. Moreover, this case is also a supplement to the general discussion in the field about the state of Russia-China contemporary political relations.

Keywords: *the Ukrainian Crisis, Sino-Russian Relations, Russia, China*

Introduction

China was declared the biggest winner of the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, for when the conflict ended its “hot” phase (in mid-2014), Beijing was recognized as a benevolent actor by both the West and Russia. The reasons of this success lied in the specific policymaking tradition of China which – in peripheral for itself dimension of Ukraine – was able to achieve its goals. China’s success contributed to deepening the asymmetrical model of relationship with Russia, yet Chinese dominance does not translate into Russia’s balancing or hedging strategic. On the contrary, Russia – China relations grew stronger and stronger. One of the reasons for that lies in the fact that China’s and Russia’s political behaviors on the international scene are complementary rather than contradictory. The Ukrainian crisis represents a great case study of that.

Constructivism, Not Realism: the Methodological Justification

In the field of Russia – China relations realism, in its all versions and forms (neorealism, structural realism or neoclassical realism) remains the dominant school. Their foreign

policies usually are viewed through the bluntly realist lens of immediate material interests and military security. No doubt there is ground for this approach, as Russian and Chinese elites have been brought up in a realist strategic culture that emphasizes the element of struggle in an often viciously competitive world, where power relations dominate at the expense of allegedly universal values (Lo, 2008, p. 176). Vladimir Putin and his team perceive the world as a zero-sum game in accordance with “a Neo-Hobbesian vision” (Lo, 2015, p. 14–47.). The perception of China, or Asia-Pacific in general, lies within this realistic approach, dominated by geopolitical considerations (Титаренко, 2008, p. 246). As for the Chinese realism, it is quite specific: non-Western, cultural, historical and “moral” one, based rather on the strategic culture than on the structure of international relations (Shen Dingli, 2016; Yan Xuetong, 2010; Johnston, 1998; Wang Gungwu, 2010) and less pessimistic than the Russian one (Rozman, 2014, p. 64, 149–168). With all differences there, understanding between Russia and China on the principles on which the international order should be based (such as non-intervention and the unconditional respect for sovereignty, (Kaczmarek, 2015, p. 6)). For these reasons the topic of Sino-Russian relations in Western academia has been dominated by Bobo Lo’s realistic approach presented in his seminal book “*The Axis of Convenience*”, where the titular axis is “born of necessity, real and perceived, not natural inclination” and based on “expediency, pragmatism, and no small degree of cynicism” (Lo, 2008, p. 54–55 and 131). Other followed the suit by describing Sino-Russian relations as an example of “pragmatic and opportunistic co-operation – real, but shallow” (Jakobsen et al., 2011, p. 3–5) and even as “frienemies” (Minxin Pei, 2013). This pessimistic narrative of Russia-China relations claim that Moscow’s and Beijing’s partnership is limited: “pragmatic, calculating and constrained” (Lo, 2017).

Although dominant, the neorealist narrative is hardly the only one on Russia-China relations. There are, naturally, both Russian and Chinese narratives that both can be classified as “official optimism”, emphasizing that Russia and China are complementary, declaring “a new type of great power relations” and “win-win relationship” (Lubina, 2017, p. 13). Chinese and Russian researchers point out to the fact that contradictions, disagreements or the lack of the implementation of bilateral deals are in fact details that do not influence the generally good mood of relations (Yu Bin, 2016, p. 129–144); that not being “always with each other” does not automatically mean hostility (Trenin, 2016); and that they have “strategic benefits” which keep them together (Gabuev, 2017). However, given the general subjugation of academia to political authority (both formal and, more importantly, informal) in both countries it is unsurprisingly that these narratives usually follow the official agendas of both Moscow and Beijing (with noticeable differences and exceptions notwithstanding).

That is why more valuable criticism of the pessimistic, realistic narrative comes from social constructivist perspective, paying attention to values and ideas that influence actions and choices. Constructivists reject the notion of “axis of convenience” (Nation, 2010, p. 38–41) and show that after the 2008 crisis Sino-Russian relations “failed to conform to the logic of power politics”; instead of intensifying discrepancies, Moscow and Beijing even

intensified cooperation – weakening Russia did not behaved “realistically” (balancing or hedging against China) but rather reproached with China even further (Kaczmarek, 2015, p. 3–8). According to this narrative, a “peaceful power transition” between Russia and China is on the way, with Russian accommodation to the new situation and Chinese self-restraint based on Russian elite’s reading of China’s intentions (Ibid., p. 169).

This article follows the constructivist narrative as the main assumptions presented here are based on the cultural factors that influence policymakers; an area usually neglected by realists, yet vital for such non-Western civilizations-turned-nation states as Russia and China.

The Spotlight versus The Shade. The Different Policymaking Styles

Russia and China are both authoritarian (though quite different: there is much more personal freedom in Russia and much less economic efficiency and the other way round in China (Lo, Shevtsova, 2012, p. 45–66) and they both agree on the general principles of international politics (which, according to Moscow and Beijing should be based on Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, *Российско-Китайская совместная декларация...*). Despite this common philosophical approach to the international system, there are important differences in policymaking styles but also in roles, expectations and visions. The most clearly visible difference is the style of policymaking. Russia “tends to favor strong, active, and often surprising diplomatic maneuvers”, whereas China “is more reactive and cautious” (Fu Ying, 2015). “Russia is mastered in boxing, while China is skilled in tai chi” (Gabuev, 2017); “whereas the Russians do not shy away from confrontation and brusque in-your-face methods, the Chinese prefer Tai Chi gymnastics, with its many feints. Russian tactics can scare the Chinese; Chinese moves can confuse the Russians” (Trenin, 2015). As Chong-Pin Lin underlines, “China prefers to play *go* than chess; in chess one side is often alarmed by the opponent’s moves and incoming danger, while in *go* one may lose without knowing it to the last moment, when the game is over” (Chong-Pin Lin, 2006, p. 83). More deeply, there is a difference in the philosophy, in which “the cold pragmatism preferred by Chinese political elites remains in blunt contradiction with messianic motives present in Russian policies” (Kozłowski, 2011, p. 198); though, naturally, Russia has a lot of pragmatism too, but its sober *Realpolitik* is mixed with great power syndrome. The difference in philosophy is reflected in the understanding of the win-win situation, too: “The Chinese understand a win-win idea differently from the Russians. For them, it’s not a roughly 50/50 deal; it’s any deal ranging from 99/1 to 1/99, where the specific ratio depends on the negotiations. The only alternative is not to make a deal and make no money at all”; this difference is to blame for the fact that unless anything changes, “that ratio will be shifting closer to 1/99 in China’s favor” (Gabuev, 2016.) As one Chinese diplomat puts it, “win-win just means you haven’t negotiated hard enough” (quoted in: Lo, 2015, p. 310).

These cultural patterns translate into policymaking style. Both Russia and China are rising powers, but they act differently. Contrary to Russia’s megalomania, the Chinese attitude

differs significantly: whereas Russia rises its global status, China lowers it. Beijing has few illusions about its weaknesses and limitations – China has come a long way, but there is still a lot ahead. Although the Chinese assume their innate superiority, they remember the “hundred years of humiliation” very well. That is why, although the “fifth generation” of Chinese leaders started to “rise heads”, China is still very modest in comparison with Russia. The reason comes directly from the Chinese political culture, according to which a state should rather hide its capabilities than proclaim and announce its might.

Until the late 2009, there was an “informal division of labour” between Russia and China. On the one hand, Russia upgraded its position by positioning itself as a great power and thus dominated the global dimension of their relations. China, on the other hand, behaved passively and kept a low profile in order not to be entangled in global politics. This reflected the nature of policy-making in both Russia and China: “the Russian elite felt an inherent need to be involved in every major international issue, even if it did not have to offer in terms of potential solutions to international problems (...) from Russia’s perspective, participation in global decision-making became yet another way for it to increase its prestige and to retain its voice”; while China “took the reverse approach, adapting to those norms and rules of the Western liberal order that it regarded as conducive to its own goals and focusing its attention specially on economic issues” (Kaczmarek, 2015, p. 35–136).

China acts differently. Although it shares with Moscow a deep dislike for American hegemonism (Лукин, 2013, p. 326), it does not challenge the liberal world system directly (Beijing was able even to develop its own positive discourse on international relations, equally hypocritical to the dominant Western one, expressed in phrases like “fairness and objectivity serve as guiding principles for Beijing when addressing international affairs” (Fu Yin, 2015)). China simply knows it is too early – the time for challenging the system has not yet come. Moreover, it prefers to challenge the international system (U.S. hegemony) using the others’ hands so that they do not suffer setbacks such as the lack of Western investments (Лукин, 2013, p. 326). Thus, China “has not attempted to use its friendship with Moscow [as] a bargaining counter in dealings with the West (...) Russia is too weak to perform such a role” for China “strategic partnership” is “a supplement, not an alternative, to its burgeoning ties with the United States and Europe” (Lo, 2008, p. 45). Beijing would not allow that the relations with Russia damaged the most important policy goal: foster conditions to facilitate the country’s modernization. China understands perfectly well that its key partner is the United States, not Russia. Beijing “does not consider international situation as a zero-sum game; its policy is more sophisticated. China strives not so much to limit Russia’s or US’s actions in general, but to limit the possibilities of limitation of the actions by the USA or Russia. From one hand Beijing strives to maximize its own freedom of actions, on the other, it still hopes that the US and Russia would be able to conduct activities that guarantee stability, thus removing responsibility from Beijing’s back” (Kozłowski, 2011, p. 314). That is why for Beijing the relations with Moscow are of the first and foremost strategic importance – to secure its “strategic rear” in order to concentrate on domestic modernization and the South

China Sea, to ensure the continued flow of energy and other commodity imports (advanced arms); beside these, Russia is a useful ally to limit the Western ideological pressure (Lo, 2008, p. 3–44).

These differences show the very different nature of policymaking in both countries. Russia loves “high politics” and disregards “low politics”, which is best visible in the history of its membership in G-8. There it “abstained from issues it considered to belong to the sphere of low politics” – it was “a testament to Moscow’s attachment to a high-profile political presence rather than a substantial belief in the effectiveness and indispensability of multilateral frameworks”. The same can be said about its crisis management; Moscow’s guiding principle in the international sphere has been “to [be] involved, an aspect Moscow used instrumentally for prestige purposes (...) the general objective was to appear powerful” (Kaczmarek, 2015, p. 135–136). This has resulted in never-ending rhetoric wars on words with the Western world that last still and are likely to do so in the future. This tendency, combined with the incurable Russian megalomania causes triumphalism in time of success and a tendency to rush, audacious actions in policy making. For example, the success in Syria in 2013 strengthened Putin’s confidence to such extent that he started to take actions to establish an alternative global political-ideological centre. Since then he has been striving to become the leader of the anti-Western block, challenging the USA politically and axiologically (through the defense of “traditional values” against widely understood political and social liberalism (e.g. Putin, 2013)). In doing so, “Moscow is inclined to overestimate the extent of Western weakness” (Lo, 2015, p. xxii).

China, on the other side, although welcomes the idea of the concert of powers, does not feel the need to be present at every forum or organization – Beijing has been doing so only when important Chinese interests were at stake. Besides, before the 2010s it had tried to find ways that could testify its declared non-confrontational stance: “Moscow punched above its weight while Beijing continued to hide its increasing capabilities; with the potential of regional power, Russia acted like a global superpower, China for its part, was transforming into a serious global actor and yet tended to act as a regional one” (Kaczmarek, 2015, p. 135–137). Although from the economic crisis of 2008, China has been steadily more and more active on the international stage (believing that being and becoming a global great power means global interests and responsibilities), overtaking Russia in many aspects, nevertheless, in the style of policymaking China still prefers to rather downgrade than upgrade its international position. Although since 2013 Beijing remains quite assertive in its “Chinese dream” style, this assertiveness cannot be matched with Russian bravado (Lo, 2015, p. 216); and Beijing is still aware that China cannot afford a confrontation with the US yet. The West remains the key partner in ending the grand modernization, and this is Beijing’s top priority.

Russia plays a very specific role for China: it is its “strategic screen”. China simply loves to “hide behind Russia’s back”. In crisis situations, Beijing prefers to move into the shade; it calculates that it is better not to lean out, not to face criticism and negative consequences

and to quietly do its things. Russia functions here as China's "strategic screen." "Putin, who has been building his position on anti-Americanism and demonstrational challenging the West in many aspects, suits China ideally; thanks to him China 'hides in the shade', it discreetly supports him and get so needed time" (Pyffel, 2014). This strategy works because – what is important – it suits both sides. Moscow, contrary to Beijing, likes to be in the spotlight, to play above its position and potential – this is how it builds its position of influential player, whose presence is necessary in solving global problems. The Ukrainian crisis is a good case study of that.

The Ukrainian Crisis as a Case Study of Russia and China Policymaking Styles

Since the beginning of the Ukrainian protests in November 2013, China has kept distance and even treated the whole situation as a potential opportunity for itself. However, the dramatic deterioration of the situation in February 2014, with toppling of Yanukovich government by Maidan protestors and subsequent Russian intervention in Crimea (and then in Eastern Ukraine) brought China into an uncomfortable situation – for Beijing both relations with the West and with Russia are very important. From the Chinese perspective, one should not stand for any side and remain neutral as long as possible. The Russian annexation of Crimea was to surprise Beijing – this Russian action resulted in Beijing falling into an "Ukrainian trap". The way in which Beijing got out of the trap once proved Chinese diplomatic capabilities.

In the surrounding conflict, Beijing decided to maneuver, not to take a stand and hide behind Russia. From the Chinese point of view, the best solution from the "Ukrainian dilemma" was a "studied ambivalence", or even "strategic ambivalence" (Cohen, 2014, Yu Bin, 2014a). A tangible proof for Chinese neutrality was that Beijing abstained from voting during the ballot on condemnation of Crimea referendum at the Security Council of the United Nations (it was blocked by Russia). According to its strategy, China in the beginning phase of the crisis assumed a position of a player standing on the side and observing the ongoing conflict – as the Chinese rule tells: *zuo shan guan hu dou*, which means "Sitting on a hill watching two tigers fight". It was possible because of an impression of chaos: the following Chinese communicates instead of clarifying, brought less light to the Chinese position, which was consentient with the Beijing's intention (Pyffel, 2014; Lubina, 2014, p. 363–380).

However, along with the development of the Ukrainian crisis, and above all with the imposition of Western sanctions, the Chinese neutrality has changed into a "kind neutrality" (or benign, or sympathetic, or friendly) towards Russia. It happened because of a couple of reasons. First of all, the Chinese implemented their other maxim, which is a Chinese equivalent to ours "divide and rule" - *yi yi zhi yi* which roughly means: "fight off one barbarian by another". In this specific case it meant to support the weaker – thus Russia, but not as much as to antagonize the West. From the Beijing's perspective, the Russian action was

not praiseworthy, but less damaging than the American backup for Maidan (considered as a Western-led conspiracy which overthrew the legal government, similarly to “color revolutions” (Kaczmarek, 2014)). The Russian annexation of Crimea, thus a violation of the territorial inviolability, was after all the lesser evil than the seizure of power by Maidan, as a result of overthrow of a legal government. China supported Russia, but in a way noticeable to win Russia’s “gratitude” (and to empower itself vis-à-vis Moscow) and not significantly, as not to spoil the relations with the West. China called for the “Ukraine’s stability, economic development, and social harmony”; a key missing word in this statement was “sovereignty” (Yu Bin, 2014a). It was characteristic, because China usually stands its ground in the terms of sovereignty defense, however at that moment persisting in “sovereignty” would place China on the Western side of the barricade, and as a matter of fact on the side against Russia, which stocked to the “law of nation self-determination”. Next reason for this slight lean towards Russia was of an internal nature. The situation in Ukraine influenced the Chinese imagination: a vision of chaos, irrationality and extreme emotions leading to downfall and break-up inscribed perfectly into the most negative archetype of chaos (*luan*) in the Chinese political culture – the absolute worst possible scenario, which can only be withheld by a strong power (Lubina, 2014, p. 365–380). When they observed Ukraine, the Chinese political elites saw in their mind’s eye this scenario in their own country, if the power of the Communist Party of China loose power. In such a situation, a natural reaction of the Chinese elites was to support the party who offered hope for calming the situation down and bringing peace with arbitrary methods (in such situation everything is allowed). For the Chinese elites it was mainly Russia.

The “kind neutrality” of Beijing met with Russian gratitude, if not to say with enthusiasm. Putin thanked China for support in an emotional way (*Обращение...*). It seems that Russian reaction was on the one hand a political calculation (showing the Chinese support as something more important than it was in the reality), and on the other hand a proof of the importance of psychological factor in the Russian politics: Russians, who often operate with the extremes, felt that in the ground-breaking moment the Chinese supported them. However, the Chinese position primary resulted from the reserved calculation of its own interest. Limited conflict between the West and Russia was and still is beneficial for Beijing. The crisis tied the USA to Europe, and at the same time diverted (at least partially) their attention from the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, according to a reasoning in Taoism, in which even in the worst possible situation one can find positive accents, China saw advantage in the Russian annexation of Crimea. Smart seizure of the peninsula created an interesting, and possible *casus* for the future game for Taiwan and in disputes on the South China Sea (de Paal, 2014). Above all, the crisis strengthened the Chinese position, quite the opposite as happened in case of Russia – it narrowed down the strategic field of Russia (“it guaranteed, that for a long time Russia will be China’s safe and strategic backside” (Trenin, 2014). Moreover, the Western sanctions led to a situation in which, from the Russian perspective, China’s relevance rose, as it is the only one important world’s economy, that did

not join sanctions. That caused a greater dependence of Russia from China as a source of independent funding: “A Chinese phrase for this is *xingzai lehuo*, or to take delight in other’s misfortunes (sometimes translated into German as *Schadenfreude*). Despite the sympathies it has expressed, it is likely China feels itself better off for the suffering in Ukraine” (De Paal, 2014; Rumer, 2014).

Certainly the repercussions of the crisis strengthened China *vis-à-vis* Russia, which became perfectly apparent during the visit of Vladimir Putin in May 19–20, 2014 in Shanghai. Although the visit was prepared earlier, its time coincided with the Ukrainian crisis, which resulted in the fact that geopolitics casted a complete shadow over this meeting – for Moscow it was important to display this meeting as a turning point in the relations, and as a true beginning of “Russian turn towards Asia”. A symbol of this turn and the most important moment of the visit was of course the signing up of the gas contract.

Putin arrived to the summit politically weakened due to the couple of reasons. Mainly, it was because of Ukraine – after the Western sanctions Putin wanted to demonstrate that “Russia is not alone” and that it has a couple of important partners somewhere else: “what mattered most to Putin was signalling to the United States and Europe that Russia was strategically independent, would not be intimidated by the imposition of sanctions, and possessed powerful friends” (Lo, 2014, p. 142). Thus, Russia wanted this deal much more than China did. However, the Russian position was also weaker due to long-term economic causes – shale gas revolution, the increasing significance of the LNG in the world, as well as the vivification of the European plans on lowering the dependence from Russia. All these features changed the balance of power in energy suppliers (Russia) and consumers to the benefit of the latter (Rumer, 2014).

Beijing made use of their supremacy. First it “waited out” Putin: first day it did not agree upon Russia’s conditions and sent controlled leaks to newspapers, that the contract will not be concluded. Putin was so desperate that he was even going to ask Jiang Zemin for support. The Chinese side laid down hard bargain and held on to it: low price (around 350–380 USD for 1000m³ *vis-à-vis* Russian proposition 400 USD), and above all, the energetic investments on Siberia and the Russian Far East (Rodkiewicz, 2014). Gas pipeline is to be built on the Chinese debt – the price and fee mechanism is constructed in such a way that Chinese *de facto* pay for the infrastructure – and will be responsible for it. This gives China huge possibilities of influence on Siberia – a transformation it into raw material base for China’s development.

The summit full of fanfares lasted two days and was a huge political demonstration. It was connected with the Chinese-Russian maneuvers ongoing nearby. The summit finished with signing up forty-six agreements and memoranda (*Документы*, 2014). However, “most of them are non-binding memoranda, letters of intent, or framework contracts” (Rodkiewicz, 2014): “in normal circumstances these documents wouldn’t have reached the leaders’ desks. This stack may have been meant to impress others” (Gabuev, 2014). That is why, gas contract aside, the “economic results of the summit are at best modest”. The summit’s economic

results reflect well “the structural problems in the economic relations between China and Russia (...) the two states’ economic cooperation is based on a ‘semi-colonial’ model of simple trade exchange, under which Russia nearly exclusively sells China raw materials and imports mainly industrial products from China” (Rodkiewicz, 2014). Signing up a contract had mainly a political meaning. The political facade of the summit was also emphasized by the “joint statement”, which was similar to the summit – only a relative Russia’s success and an evident success of China (*Совместное...*, 2014).

Russia obtained only a partial support from China (in the case of sanctions and the Russian critique of the Western actions in Ukraine), but not in the key issues for Russia, such as the federalization of Ukraine and neutrality, or condemnation of the Kiev government. “Putin did not obtain a full and explicit support from the side of «strategic partner»”; in the case of central Asia declaration was a compromise – Moscow managed to get Beijing’s support for the idea of the Eurasian Union and the assurance of respectfulness towards Russian business, but it had to acknowledge the Chinese “Silk Road” (Rodkiewicz, 2014). To sum up these considerations, one can add that China supported Russia there, where it was comfortable and beneficial from the perspective of their own business, and there, where it costed little – but nowhere else.

Generally the summit finished with the real success of China and relative, mainly the image-building success of Russia. This success was absolutely necessary for Russia, which was ready to pay a high price for signing up the gas deal. This is indicated by the words of Putin himself, who told that “Chinese are very serious negotiators”, who “drank quite a bit of our blood during the negotiations” (Yu Bin, 2014, b). On the other side, the fact that gas prices soon fell down might indicate that it wasn’t completely a bad deal for Russia.

Although Russian commentators announced programmatic optimism and highlighted the summit success and “equal conditions” (Лукьянов, 2014), some of them like Dmitri Trenin admitted that China was the one who benefited mostly: “it will reshape and rebalance Eurasia, whose center of gravity will now move from Moscow to Beijing (...) such an outcome would certainly benefit China, but it will give Russia a chance to withstand U.S. geopolitical pressure, compensate for the EU’s coming energy re-orientation, develop Siberia and the Far East, and link itself to the Asia-Pacific region” (Trenin, 2014). Thus, its importance can only be compared to the “Moscow’s opening to Western Europe in the late 1960s” (Trenin, 2014). One does not need to add that China is the biggest winner of this situation: “Putin, like a gambler, leaves his ancestral silver in a Chinese pawnshop to play for higher stakes with the West” (Korejba, 2014). From the perspective of 2018 the two most important items in the check-list for China’s “kind neutrality” on Ukraine was: agreeing to join One Belt One Road and conceding to Chinese position on South China Sea (earlier Russia distanced itself from this issue). From Moscow’s perspective, always more concentrated on “near abroad” and on dealings with the West, this was price worth paying.

Summary

Thus, to summarize, Chinese policymaking style proved to be very effective during the Ukrainian crisis as it won Russia's gratitude without alienating the West. As for Russia, the assessment must be more balanced; a critical commentator would say that on the one hand Russia due to its heavy-hand tactics alienated Ukraine for good (perhaps even lost it for good); but on the other hand, in the post-Maidan the reformers loose another elections (they already lost popular support) and it is not unlikely that a pro-Russian force would emerge again in Ukraine and then Russia would end up not only with the restoration of pre-2014 *status quo ante* but with Crimea and Lugansk and Donetsk quasi-republics holding Kiev in check.

Whatever the outcome, one thing is certain: Russia's and China's behavior during the Ukrainian crisis showed very well the cultural differences of policymaking between Russia and China. Surprisingly or not, these differences do not influence the general good mood of Russia-China relations as they are in a way complementary: they suit both sides. As such they represent yet another factor proving that Russia-China relations are stable, at least in the short-term perspective.

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