

Multiple Game in the Ukraine Crisis^{*}

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The Ukraine crisis was triggered by President Yanukovich's refusal to sign an association agreement with the European Union. Objectively speaking, this was not a strategic option important enough to change the destiny of his country. First, joining the EU has long been an established national strategy of Ukraine, which was also what Yanukovich had been advocating throughout his term in office, rather than a temporary change in policy. Second, Yanukovich's refusal was only temporary, not perpetual. Therefore, this decision was not a strategic decision, but rather a tactical arrangement at most. Last but not the least, Yanukovich's decision was soon "corrected" as the new government of Ukraine signed the association agreement six months later. When a policy is first vetoed and then OK'd within such a short time, it can never be regarded as a grand national strategy, but more like a political conflict among different interest groups. The reason that the crisis keeps escalating and has caused such serious consequences as a loss of territory, split of the country and civil war is that it is the result of a multiple strategic game subject to influence of numerous factors. The reasons behind include both the failure of Ukraine's transformation and the shoving of the geopolitical conflict between Russia on the one hand and the United States and Europe on the other. The crisis also has a great impact on China's diplomatic strategy and practices in the Eurasian region.

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UKRAINE: PREDICAMENT OF TRANSFORMATION

Since the disintegration of the USSR, the newly independent countries generally began to undergo a round of fundamental transformation. From the perspective of social reform, this is tantamount to a transformation from one social system to another, and from the perspective of the formation of nation states, this means a change from being an administrative region inside a country to an independent nation state. Although over two decades have elapsed, the transformation has not yet been over for most of the newly independent countries. The fundamental problem of national governance has yet to be settled. All these have contributed to the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis.

Firstly, the crisis has its deep root. From 1999 to 2004, Ukraine's average rate of GDP growth was 8%, while unemployment rate was merely 3.8%. Though often criticized as being autocratic, President Kuchma managed to maintain political stability at home and handled well such sensitive diplomatic issues as joining the NATO and EU, the Black Sea Fleet and Crimea. Generally speaking, the Kuchma government enjoyed high public support for the solid political and economic foundation it had laid and the stable external environment it had managed to win. However, the "Orange Revolution" took place and it turned out to be the watershed on the Ukraine's road of development. Deluded by flamboyant political slogans, all political forces in Ukraine, whether willingly or not, were deeply entrapped in the great debate about the current national political model and future path of development of Ukraine. Ukraine had thus lost its political norms, its economic development had lost the necessary momentum, its diplomacy had lost balance and the public had lost confidence, and the country was trapped in a "lost decade."¹ There were three immediate consequences. First, the rules of the game are repeatedly toppled and the country has been bogged down in lasting internal political friction. Second, the people are generally dissatisfied with the current operation of politics, and the government had lost any authority, whereas the role of non-partisan social forces is rapidly swelling in the political life of Ukraine. Third, rationality is hijacked by extremism, as shown by

the key role played by the right-wing extremist forces at the initial stage of regime change in Ukraine.

Second, internal split has been rife in Ukraine. The split between the eastern and western parts of the country has all along been regarded as the most compelling indicator of domestic unrest in Ukraine, which, however, cannot be applied to all cases. The split in Ukraine touches on issues at various levels. The first is how the Russians in Ukraine safeguard their rights and interests. They may be inclined to seek independence or return to Russia, or they hope to protect their political rights as an ethnic minority. The second is the territorial disputes between Ukraine and Russia, which has found clear expression in the divorce of Crimea from Ukraine to join Russia. And the third is the geographical division of the eastern part of the country with the Western part, or the so-called Orange-Blue divide. The eastern and western parts of Ukraine are highly different in history, culture and language, as well as different economic interests and different political stands or even political confrontation. But, these contradictions are only one among different areas and different groups of the population of the Ukrainian nation, i.e., different political views among people who share the same national identity rather than a problem of national identity, let alone confrontation among different ethnic groups. The majority of residents of the so-called Donetsk Republic and Luhansk Republic are Ukrainians, whose declared independence is just a political act to gain more power and resources as they lacked the basis for ethnic autonomy. It must be pointed out, however, that all these three issues are closely related to Russia. Especially with regard to the problem of ethnic Russians in Ukraine, they would not create such disturbance without strong support from Russia their mother country. Therefore, the problem of Ukrainian split is in essence a problem of Ukraine-Russian relations. The Ukraine crisis reveals to us that the question of ethnic Russians left behind in all newly independent CIS countries after the disintegration of the USSR will remain a time bomb. Whenever a political or economic upheaval occurs in one of the host countries and this country's relations with Russia sours, this particular country will be thrown into the same kind of trouble.

Third, all relevant parties are inclined to, driven by a crisis syndrome, adopt hardline stances at crucial points during the crisis, committing one mistake after another and eventually making the situation sliding down to the most dangerous brink. So far, the Ukraine crisis has undergone three important nodal points:

(1) The violent clashes in Kiev on 29th February. This was the beginning of international intervention in the Ukraine crisis. If Yanukovich, the legitimate elected president, could withstand external pressure and firmly perform his duties, it was highly possible to keep the extremists at bay and ensure the basic political order in the country.

(2) Russia's acceptance of Crimea into the Russian Federation on March 19. Russia's act has its own "history". Due to the ambiguity of international law and post-Cold War international practices, it is hard to judge the legitimacy of the referendum in Crimea. However, the nature of the event obviously changed after Russia decided to admit Crimea. No matter how Russia defends itself, it can neither change the fact that it has annexed a part of the Ukrainian territory nor deny the fact that Russia has violated the series of legal documents it has signed with Ukraine.² According to Oleg Dyomin, the Ukrainian ambassador to China, Russia handled this issue by political rather than diplomatic means, and this does not only hurt Ukraine, but also international law and the current international order. If a more appropriate approach is adopted, such as negotiating the Crimea issue after an effective regime is established in Ukraine, it would increase the legitimacy of Crimea's choice, or the crisis might come to another kind of ending. Unless the Crimea issue is resolved in an appropriate way in the future, such as Russia making an economic compensation or exchanging for it with another piece of Russian territory, it will remain forever a deadlock in Russia-Ukrainian relations and Russian diplomacy.

(3) The Ukrainian new government intensifying military operations in the eastern part of the country. Ukraine's political vacuum was filled when Poroshenko was elected president in May, when Ukraine finally had a new elected legitimate regime. This was an event that everyone was happy to see. But the foundation of the new regime was far from firm. Usually, a political regime gets

its legitimacy by three means. The first is the means of democracy, which means to complete power transfer within the legal framework. It was accomplished in Ukraine. The second is the functional means, meaning the government must ensure the territorial integrity, political stability and economic growth of the region it represents. And the third is the means of nationalism, meaning forging internal powerful cohesion by relying on the extensive nationalistic identity. The new Ukrainian regime has failed in the latter two. In order to consolidate its legitimacy as soon as possible, the new regime has intensified its clean-up efforts in Eastern Ukraine since April 25, in an attempt to tackle internal conflict by force. Ukraine is thus plunged into a real catastrophe, greatly increasing the risk of driving the crisis out of control. The domestic military conflicts have caused over thousands of deaths and made almost a million people homeless. Whether the Ukrainian government will win the military conflict in the end, the internal wounds it has caused are there and are more difficult to heal than those caused by the February bloody clashes in Kiev. As the war goes on, the election of the Verhovna Rada held ahead of schedule is likely to further strengthen the influence of the extremist force, which will force the government to adopt more radical steps, such as breaking off diplomatic ties with Russia or even declaring a war. Once the crisis evolves into a war between Ukraine and Russia, what it will change is not only the fate of Ukraine, but that of entire Europe.

Realizing that the Ukraine crisis was about to reach a desperate impasse, the three parties — Russia, Ukraine and the EU — eventually put on the brakes together. On August 26, the presidents of Russia and Ukraine held a formal meeting in Minsk to put forward their respective ceasefire proposals; the warring parties in Ukraine immediately reached a ceasefire agreement and exchanged prisoners of war. Moscow made a significant concession on the issue of Russian troops pulling out of Ukraine, a major concern to Kiev. While Poroshenko proclaimed then that 70% of the Russian troops had already pulled out, he, in return, promised to grant “special status” of a certain degree of regional autonomy to two states in eastern Ukraine. In addition, the economic representatives of Russia, Ukraine and EU reached agreement to postpone the

implementation of the Ukraine-EU Free Trade Area Agreement to the end of 2015, so as to mitigate as much as possible its impact on Russia. It is not yet clear whether the crisis would backlash and enter the fourth stage of political resolution. But, the willingness to compromise and the flexible steps all the parties have shown and adopted have shed some light on the resolution of the crisis.

RUSSIA VS. THE US AND EU: A TEST OF STRATEGIC WILL

Ukraine has all along rejected integration with Russia. It quitted the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan-Ukraine unified economic space in 2005. It was after this that Russia began work to establish the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union. Half year prior to the outbreak of the crisis, Ukraine took initiative to sign a memorandum with the Customs Union, and joined it as the *de facto* observer. This significant concession on the part of Ukraine was aimed at exchanging for a small step towards signing the Association Agreement with EU. As a standard diplomatic tactic of balancing between Russia and the EU to maximize its national interests, Yanukovych, however, severely underestimated Putin's reaction. Theoretically speaking, signing the Association Agreement is only a choice of the signatory country's integration with foreign economy, it does not mean a strategic turn in its economic cooperation, nor does it automatically makes Ukraine a member of the EU. Edward Lucas, senior international editor of *The Economist*, believes that, even if the Yushchenko administration continued to hold office after 2008, it would take Ukraine 15 to 20 years to be politically and economically prepared to join the EU, with the precondition that Russia does not pose any substantial impediment.³ However, in contrast to Russia's verbal rejection or even acquiesce of the three Baltic countries' accession into the EU in 2002, Putin took a hard stance to reject Ukraine's accession to the EU.⁴ The reasons are as follows.

First, although the EU is a supranational organization primarily based on economic integration, most its earlier members have chosen to join the NATO meanwhile, which makes the strategic implications of such a political decision self-evident. What worries

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Russia most are not the economic de-Russianization, but the trend of divorce from and opposition to Russia politically and militarily, just as those countries that have joined both the EU and the NATO. This not only squeeze Russia's geopolitical space to the minimum and make Russia face unprecedented security risks, but also has brought about numerous new political and economic challenges to Russia. This is what Russia can never accept Russia has spared no effort to prevent Ukraine from joining the EU; this is not just to make up for its past mistakes but also for the sake

of its future. Second, there are profound historical and cultural factors behind Russia's determined objection to Ukraine's accession to the EU. It was during the USSR period that Ukraine became a modern nation state. Ukraine achieved its first unification after World War II, and it only became a founding member of the United Nations with USSR's recommendation. The political and economic resources Moscow had invested in Ukraine are countless, with most public buildings in Kiev being financed by the USSR after the World War II. Also, Kiev is the cradle of Russian culture, and it holds great historical and cultural sacredness in the minds of Russians. Whoever runs the Kremlin will not accept the fact that their Slavic brothers to whose benefits Russia has poured so much affection and resources turns their back on Russia and go to the embrace of others. Moreover, the political system, culture and values of the EU are also incompatible with the governance ideas of Putin, who will never allow any "alien nation" to poke its nose in the affairs of Ukraine with which it is homologous and turn it into a "test field" of Western civilization. Third, significant changes have taken place in Putin's foreign strategies as compared with in the time when he first became the Russian president. Putin's tacit agreement to NATO's second round of eastward expansion was

largely because he wished to maintain the Russia-US anti-terrorism alliance established after the September 11 terrorist attacks, and then gain strong support from the US in such issues as energy and its accession to the WTO. However, he soon came to be aware that the West was not a reliable partner. Since then, unilateralism rather than cooperation with the West has become the major means for him to achieve his diplomatic goals.

Putin was silent for almost a week after the outbreak of the crisis, and then he took Crimea in shocking speed, which shows such a move had remained an option of Russia's foreign policy towards Ukraine. If we say Russia hesitated a bit at the initial stage of the crisis, its strategic intention has turned extremely clear when the crisis has evolved to the current stage, i.e., not rigidly adhering to any temporary loss but realizing Russia's permanent control of Ukraine by means of high-profile struggles. At the moment, Putin has prepared three diplomatic tactics regarding the Ukraine issue: the first one is to implement the Geneva Accord by following Russia's own roadmap — to change fundamentally the state system of Ukraine peacefully, make it a neutral country under federal system and achieve internal reconciliation. As for the specific ways to achieve this end, it can be both negotiation and tradeoff with Ukraine's new regime under international mediation or consultation among all political factions throughout Ukraine, including those from the eastern part of the country. The second one is to separate the east part from Ukraine as Crimea did to establish a new sovereign country. For Moscow, this is after all regard the second best option. So far, however, Moscow has neither admitted the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk nor forced the new regime of Ukraine to do so. This reveals that Putin's foremost option in the settlement of the Ukraine crisis is to have a "unified and tamed" Ukraine. Russia's sustained support to the separatist forces in eastern Ukraine is out of two considerations. The first is to preserve important forces to influence the future trend of political situation in Ukraine. The existence of eastern Ukraine as a political force means that there is one vote vetoing Ukraine's getting close to the West. The other is to maintain the continuity of Russian's foreign policy. Taking back Crimea ensured

Putin a complete victory at the first stage of the Ukraine crisis. But, Russia's approach to intervene has also, to a certain degree, changed itself from an intervener into a hostage of the parties of Ukraine's internal conflicts. The forces in eastern Ukraine and Russia are bound together, their failure would also mean the failure of Russia's foreign policy towards Ukraine.

Russia's topmost option for eastern Ukraine is stalemate. In this way, Moscow will in a favorable position to balance and manipulate, which is more positive for it in its foreign relations. This is precisely what Ukraine cannot accept. Either political or legal separation of eastern part would mean a fatal calamity for Ukraine, as it would have nothing left except for the capital city Kiev and the name of the country after the eastern territories are lost. Yet, this is not yet the worst ending of the Ukraine crisis. If the civil war goes on and on, extremist and external forces will turn eastern Ukraine into a hotbed for extremist and terrorist forces and then Ukraine will become a source of instability in Europe like Afghanistan and Iraq in the Middle East. This is not the result Russia, Ukraine and the international community wish to see. If the situation reaches such a desperate point, Russia is bound to intervene militarily, which will, of course, cost Russia a huge price in the form of long-term political and security risks. Therefore, this is definitely a good option unless the situation approaches the point of no return.

When EU announced its Eastern Partnership initiative for the new Eastern European six, including Ukraine, in 2009, it only hoped to make a window to promote economic cooperation and humanistic and cultural exchanges between the EU and the CIS countries. The EU had no intention of becoming a new player in Eastern-Western geopolitics, and Russia's reaction was also quite modest. Since Putin's Eurasian Union initiative was put into practice, Moscow realized that EU's plan was to encourage the six Eastern European countries to become independent, strong and prosperous, and eventually join the EU. Such a plan is in seriously opposition to Russia's geopolitical concept of establishing an integrated institution based on the Eurasian Union. The Eastern Partnership program was hence openly opposed and obstructed by Russia. Except for Georgia and Moldova, the other four

countries have backed out from or suspended this plan. Though satisfactory progress has been observed in the Eurasian Union in Central Asia, the core pursuit of Putin is not pursuing interests tradeoffs with the Muslim countries in Central Asia; he seeks a sort of close integration with the three East Slavic brothers in a supranational nature, reaching at least the level of the “Anglo-Saxon” type of special partnership⁵. For EU, the cornerstone of the Eastern Partnership initiative is Ukraine. Unless Brussels give up this initiative, EU will have to enter into another round of geopolitical contest with Moscow. Therefore, there will hardly be any room for compromise no matter what form the contest between the EU and Russia in Ukraine takes, and this will have profound implications on the development of the regional situation.

The geopolitical contest is inevitable for Russia and Europe in Ukraine. The United States far away across the Atlantic, however, gets itself involved voluntarily. The US does not have a long history of diplomatic relations with Ukraine. The two countries are geographically far apart, share less historic and cultural links, and are not deeply interdependent in economy. The US’ foremost objective in Ukraine after the latter’s independence is to denuclearize it, which was achieved after the presidents of the United States, Russia and Ukraine jointly signed the three-party agreement to destroy all nuclear weapons on the territory of Ukrainian territory in 1994. The second objective of the United States is to support the independent development of Ukraine. The more independent Ukraine becomes, the less it will be dependent on Russia, and in this way the US potentially achieves the goal of constraining and containing Russia. There are three approaches to realize this: The first is to firmly safeguard Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity; the second is to encourage Ukraine to join the trans-Atlantic integration dominated by the United States; and the third is to help Ukraine to get rid of its dependence on Russian economy and energy. Taking back Crimea back, Russia not only has broken the post-Cold War border arrangements but also shows Russia’s intention to put Ukraine under its complete control. This represents a reversal in the regional situation that has taken the

last twenty years to form, and also a complete subversion of the US' diplomatic achievements in Ukraine, some that absolutely not acceptable to the US. Consequently, as soon as the crisis broke out, the US has paid rare attention to Ukraine, rendering it with unprecedented political, economic and military support. Apart from giving support, the US has mobilized the Western world to impose economic sanctions on Russia, and denounced it openly at the UN. These actions immediately led Russian-US relations to a state of antagonism, and the Ukraine crisis has thus turned into an international crisis testing the strategic wills of Russia and the United States.

Like all crises and confrontations between the two sides in history, the party that takes the initiative and continuously imposes pressure can usually not be able to bring a major impact on the revolution of the crisis. The ultimate result of the crisis is more often than not determined by the party on the defensive — where it would make a concession and to what extent. In other words, the interests, rather than the concrete measures adopted in the crisis, are the major factor that decides the result of a crisis. This is just like the “playing chicken” game in international politics. When two cars drive rapidly toward each other, what determines who will give up on the last moment is not their speed, but the firmness of their attitude? This rule applies to the Berlin Crisis, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Russo-Georgian conflict. In the Ukraine crisis, Russia appears to be the underdog in face of the sanctions of the West and criticism of the international community. It is especially so after the Malaysian airplane was hit and crashed in Ukraine. Russia was subject to unprecedented moral pressure. Nevertheless, this is a test of strategic will instead a bargain in strategic interests. Russia has clearly claimed that Ukraine is its core interest that it will defend at any cost. Although the United States renders support to Ukraine in all aspects, the latter is nevertheless only a pawn in its Eurasian strategy, or more precisely, its Russian strategy. What the US cares about now is victory in the contest of strategic will rather than the gain or loss of strategic interests. In other words, the US wants to save its face. Though the confrontation appears to be fierce, its intensity has not

yet exceeded their confrontation during the Georgia crisis. Since the US didn't use full strength during the Georgia crisis, it is not expected that it will hold on in Ukraine till the last minute. It is not impossible that the crisis be resolved and the confrontation be ended in the same old way.

Since founded, Ukraine has tried out a variety of ways to get rid of Russia's control, one of which is the high-profile political movement to join the EU, as shown by the fact that each Ukrainian leader will first announce his/her unswerving pursuit of European values as soon as he/she takes office. However, the EU is now unable to offer a second Marshall Plan or any effective measures other than its appealing political system, which makes it impossible for it to contest with Russia forever. Being stuck in between the East and West geopolitically determines that the rise of pro-European forces to power can only be the reflection of short-term political struggle; it can neither be lasting nor universal. Ukraine will eventually return to its fundamental strategy of balance between the East and West. The best solution for its future is to keep pace with the economic integration of Russia and the EU, do solid job in economic cooperation with both and use the economic dividend to water down the political disputes. The politicians now in Ukraine should have a clear understanding about the relationship between the country's long-term interests and the short-term demands of its populace, sorting out the political priorities and stop making impractical decisions. Otherwise, there will be another Yanukovich.

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IMPACT ON CHINA'S EURASIAN DIPLOMACY

Both Ukraine and Russia have established strategic partnerships with China. After the outbreak of the crisis, China took a neutral stand that is consistent with the principle of “non-interference in other’s internal affairs”. Different from the previous passive attitude of “remaining detached,” China’s neutrality this time has taken on a posture. China has expressed its willingness to take an “active and constructive stance” to help resolve the crisis in both the abstract but meaningful remarks, such as “historical factors are at play” and “Everything has a reason,” by the Foreign Ministry spokesperson, and the special remarks made by Chinese leaders on several occasions after the outbreak of the crisis. In hindsight, the above stand of China is appropriate, accords with the actual circumstances and evolution of the crisis, and has been acknowledged by both Ukraine and Russia. Nevertheless, success in taking the right stand can in no way hide more profound impact of the crisis on China’s Eurasian diplomacy.

I. Impact on Sino-Ukrainian Strategic Partnership

After the Sino-Ukrainian strategic partnership was established in 2011, Ukraine had become one of the countries in which Chinese investments increased the most rapid, and China had also surpassed Russia to become Ukraine’s largest trading partner in general goods except for petroleum. When Ukrainian politicians were still fighting over which direction its economic integration should take, the country’s businesspeople had seen a third path to the east. Take the coal-to-gas project aided by China for example. It boasts an annual processing capacity of 6 million tons of coal, roughly equivalent to 5-6 billion cubic meters of natural gas worth 7-9 billion US dollars. This project helps Ukraine reduce its gas import by 8%~10%. To Ukraine, a country depends heavily on imported gas, the benefit speaks for itself. As most trade agreements between China and Ukraine are inter-governmental and premised on a stable relationship with the current Ukrainian government, China expects the political situation in Ukraine to be stable. At the initial stage of the crisis, Chinese leaders not only hosted a Ukrainian delegation in accordance with predetermined plan and specifications, but also

spoke highly of the important role Yanukovich played in the Sino-Ukrainian strategic partnership. The Development Plan for China-Ukraine Strategic Partnership (2014-2018), agreed upon by leaders of both countries, also indicated China's confidence in maintaining the partnership established during Yanukovich's term of office. The motive embodied China's Ukraine policy is to promote the country's independence and development; it has never intended to control or impose influence over it. Therefore, all Chinese loans to Ukraine have no additional political terms whatsoever, and Kiev does not bear any political burdens. However, this gives rise to a problem, i.e., when a reversal takes place in the Ukrainian political situation, how should China secure the necessary political guarantee and sustainability of Sino-Ukrainian inter-governmental projects the agreements on which were reached during Yanukovich's term of office? How are these projects to be carried on? Will the new government reconsider the priority of Ukraine-China economic cooperation? In view that a regime change will inevitably cause some changes in personnel and rules, the new government will have to redistribute the economic interests obtained at state national level in line with the needs of domestic political struggle even if it intends to keep going along the line of the Yanukovich administration. It is obvious that any decision made cannot be purely out of economic considerations. On the part of Chinese enterprises and relevant functional departments, they should certainly make necessary preparations to begin all over again while doing all they can to prevent damages caused by the Ukrainian crisis to Sino-Ukrainian economic cooperation.

For a long time after the outbreak of the crisis, there was not a new legitimate government in Ukraine. China had to halt although it had many appeals. After Poroshenko was elected president, it turned perfectly justifiable for Chinese and Ukrainian governments to communicate with each other, thus the smooth transition and sustainable stability of China-Ukraine relations was also put on agenda. If the expectation was to go back to the normal state relations before the Yanukovich administration, it would be enough to simply maintain low-level exchanges. However, this was evidently not compatible with the positioning of Sino-

Ukrainian strategic partnership. To have the relations return to the level prior to the crisis, it was necessary for China to take the initiative, particularly to establish higher-level contacts with the new government as soon as possible. So far, leaders of Russia, the United States, EU, Belarus and Kazakhstan have all met with Poroshenko. Of course, as the new government is still under the shadow of the interim government prior to it, appropriate political contacts can only be made to it after a clear understanding has been gained of the political ecology in the country. Otherwise, all agreements and declarations made might turn out to meaningless pieces of paper in the end. The parliamentary election in late October and the subsequent government shake-up shall be the final nodal points to study and judge whether Poroshenko will be a transitional figure or a national leader with real power.

After the regime change, the biggest problem in the post-crisis Sino-Ukrainian economic cooperation has been Crimea. During his visit to China, Yanukovich expressed Ukraine's willingness to participate in the building of the "Silk Road Economic Belt." This was the first time that China got open support from the leader of a country outside of Central Asia since it put forward the initiative. One of the numerous economic cooperation memorandums signed by China and Ukraine is on investment in Crimea. Ukraine hoped to build a modern airport, a liquefied natural gas terminal and a dockyard, and to renovate and expand the deepwater port and its supporting industrial and transport facilities to increase its cannula argo handling capacity to 140 million tons, thus making it a transshipment port for transporting Ukrainian agricultural products to China and shipping Chinese mechanic products to Eastern Europe. It is convenient, fast and cost-effective to move goods to the Mediterranean and Europe via the Black Sea.⁶ If successfully out, it would become another project of Sino-Ukrainian strategic cooperation boosting great development perspective after the liquefied natural gas terminal. Crimea has the chance to become the most important part on the northern route of the Silk Road Economic Belt; it might even help open up a new Maritime Silk Road from China to Europe. Moreover, it is also very important for Europe by becoming a new channel for China and Europe

to cooperate in Eurasia. The outbreak of the crisis has made all this uncertain. Ukraine has officially stated that there would be no negotiations on the port construction project, and Russia has also indicated that it would not consider cooperating with China in building a deep-water port in Crimea. Russia hopes China to participate in the costly project of building a cross-sea bridge between Kerch Strait and Crimea, which would be perceived as an important move to show China's support for Russia in the Ukraine crisis; and after that Chinese companies would have other opportunities in undertaking projects in Crimea.⁷ No matter Crimea belongs to Russia or Ukraine, it holds the same economic significance for China. However, under the circumstances that the sovereignty of Crimea is disputed and that the United States and Europe impose economic sanctions against Crimea, it would be highly risky for China to take part in any economic project there. It will be difficult for China to take any economic initiative unless tacit approval is obtained from both sides, because it is not only a sovereignty dispute, but also a problem that touches on Crimea's economic connection with Europe. If this cannot be assured, China's blueprint of the Silk Road Economic Belt will not be accomplished, and so there will be no need for making investment. Consequently, the plan China has long envisaged for the northern route of the Silk Road Economic Belt has to be postponed indefinitely.

II. Impact on China's Eurasian Strategy

China's foreign policy towards Eurasia lacks a macro strategic design. The divorce between strategy and policy becomes particularly apparent after the Ukraine crisis. Late in 2011, relevant authorities in China once made a policy design directed at Eurasia, known as "one axis" (Russia) and two pivots (Kazakhstan and Ukraine)". Yet, the development of situation Ukraine has made it clear that Ukraine cannot play the basic functions as a pivot. After Ukraine sent senior diplomats to attend the annual Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony, inside China a voice appeared, criticizing Ukraine for "not being able to be a pivot point". It now seems that the same holds true in other more important areas. Moreover, as China has

also established strategic partnership with other Eurasia countries, such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, meaning to have more than one pivots, which gives rise to a situation in which many pivots means no pivots. This author holds a possible solution is to uplift the position of Central Asia in China's Eurasia strategy, at least on par with that of Russia regionally. As the key region in China's neighboring diplomacy that involves the greatest interests in China's future diplomacy, holds the greatest risks and directly put the strategic security of China's western region at stake, efforts should be made for both further development and overall consolidation of China's diplomacy in Central Asia. To take Central Asia and Russia as the two major axes of China's Eurasia diplomacy may also help solve the tension between China and Russia in Central Asia. From the perspective of international politics, this tension is of the same nature as that between Europe and Russia in Ukraine, i.e., a geopolitical crack zone making a choice between two neighboring great powers, or in other words, a question of how to divide the spheres of influence of the two great powers. Due to the influence of such structural factors as history, culture and geopolitics, this conflict cannot be changed in a short time. Central Asian countries getting united to play a role as one independent international player would help avoid the tragedy of contention between Europe and Russia for Ukraine. While the "Central Asia + Russia" dual axes are used to support China's "going west" strategy, it also serves as

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“treating the neighbors as the priority and the great powers as the key, and regarding multi-laterality as the stage”. Also, it is conducive to bringing greater play the initiative of Chinese diplomats.⁸

III. Impact on China’s Basic Principles of Diplomacy

The Ukraine crisis reveals that the principle of “non-interference in others’ internal affairs” is still the bottom line that is worth to be held.⁹ Yet, a number of different practices has derived from this principle, for example, laying greater store by developing contacts with the ruling group(s) (avoiding and even shunning contacts with opposition parties); carrying out economic cooperation out of consideration of mere economic mutual benefits (rather than giving overall consideration to the political risks of investment); and developing strategic partnerships that lay greater store by form than by essence. All these have been challenged by frequently changing diplomatic practice. If it can be said these are only technical flaws inside the relevant functional departments, the more independent judgment about international affairs and greater participation in China’s foreign affairs by the Chinese public after the Ukraine crisis give a profound expression to changes in the internal environment of China’s diplomacy.

Some Chinese media prematurely displayed a pro-Russian tendency at the early stage of the crisis. Along with the development of the crisis, two or even more voices appeared among Chinese media outlets on the Crimean question, including one that opposed China’s abstention from the voting in the UN.¹⁰ This is, in fact, a reflection of the increasing diversification of the Chinese society. Proceeding from its own logic, Russia believed this could only happen when allowed by the government, indicating that China’s view was still vague on this internally; otherwise, there would only be one dominant voice. Russia’s worry may be true. What is more important, however, is that Russian side should understand that any diplomatic decision China makes must be a choice based on China’s national interests. On the Ukraine question, China’s national interests consists of three aspects: safeguarding China’s vital economic interests in Ukraine; ensuring a smooth transition of Sino-Ukrainian strategic partnership; and not to endanger China’s

On the Ukraine question, China's national interests consists of three aspects: safeguarding China's vital economic interests in Ukraine; ensuring a smooth transition of Sino-Ukrainian strategic partnership; and not to endanger China's stability and unification because of any inappropriate declaration of China's stand.

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One other basic principle of China's foreign policy is nonalignment. All the strategic partnerships China has established with various countries so far are relations of non-alignment. Rather, they are flexible, diversified, multi-leveled and selective relations of cooperation. In other words, China will give support to any subject that is in China's interests; as for any other topic and even one that runs counter to China's interests, China will not necessarily endorse it for other one's sake. Chinese scholars and Chinese media can explain to the Chinese public the logic between Russia's diplomatic moves and its interests, but there is no need for them to defend it. That is the job of Russian scholars. No matter what Putin does, they will give logical explanations in a way that is in line

with Russia's national interests. What Chinese scholars and Chinese media should do is to judge and comment on the logic based on their own values and in a fair, objective, overall and historically meaningful way. In a world of free expression, only explanations that are based on facts will attain the most widespread acknowledgement, and only such explanations can guide the Chinese public to a better understanding of the logic of China's national interests. China's future foreign policy not only will deal with the complicated outside world, but also faces the pressure arising from a more diversified internal environment. This requires a more thorough understanding of and broader consensus on China's core diplomatic principles, making them "Chinese principles" that accord with domestic public opinion, and are lasting and extensively applicable.

1 For detailed information, see Liang Qiang, "Ukraine: The Lost Decade (2004-2014)," *Dongfang Daily*, March 4, 2014.

2 These documents include the Russia-Ukraine Agreement, Belavezha Accords, and Almaty Declaration signed in 1990; the Budapest Memorandum signed in 1994; and Russia-Ukraine Agreement signed in 1997. In these documents, Russia acknowledges the post-Cold War borders with Ukraine, including Crimea.

3 Евроинтеграция Украины — путь к краху Путина, December 17, 2013, available at: <http://inosmi.ru/sngbaltia/20131217/215779343.html>.

4 For details regarding Putin's position on the three Baltic countries' accession to NATO and EU, please see Liang Qiang, "Identity and Security Dilemma — The Three Baltic Countries' Relations to Russia after Their Accession to NATO and EU," *Russian East European and Central Asian Studies*, No.3, 2012.

5 Brzezinski's famous words "Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian Empire" is widely quoted, but very few people notice the following text "Russia without Ukraine can still strive for imperial status, but it would then become a predominantly Asian imperial state, more likely to be drawn into debilitating conflicts with aroused Central Asians". With reference to Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, Shanghai, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1998, p.62.

6 Украина и Китай совместно построят в Крыму глубоководный порт, December 12, 2013, available at: http://www.ukrinform.ua/rus/news/ukraina_i_kitay_sovmestno_postroyat_v_krimu_glubokovodniy_port_1583346.

7 Китайцы войдут в Крым по мосту, May 5, 2014, available at: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2464879>.

8 See other articles by Liang Qiang, "China's Eurasian Strategy," *South Reviews*, No.4, 2013; and "Central Asia: New Axis of China's Neighboring Diplomacy," *South Reviews*, No. 10, 2013.

9 In the globalization era, interference is no longer a political issue concerning morality and justice, but an economic problem involving cost and benefit. Interference itself gives no cause for criticism. However, a successful interference should be a responsible one. The interferences of the US in Iraq and Afghanistan are not responsible ones and thus unsuccessful. Such interferences are worse than no interference.

10 Yang Shu, a famous expert on Central Asia issues, stated in an article published on gmw.cn, which is hosted by *Guangming Daily*, "We must oppose firmly any determination through referendum of any region's legal status. We must clearly stand against separatism." "As for the Crimea referendum, China should not abstain from voting in the UN. We should publicly show our objection. We cannot say that we respect the people's choice, but only say we respect sovereignty and territorial integrity." Available at: http://www.gmw.cn/content/2014-03/21/content_10740516.htm.