

UNSC Vote on the Crimean Issue: Why did China Abstain?

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March 21, 2014

When China decided to abstain in the vote taken in the UN Security Council on the issue of the referendum to decide on Crimea's future; it handed the Western powers a pyrrhic victory for they could then proclaim that Russia was completely isolated as all the other UNSC members had voted in favour of the western sponsored resolution. Despite their rather close relations with Russia, President Xi Jinping chose Russia as the first country that he visited on taking office and was in Sochi for the Winter Olympics, the Chinese were aware of the ramifications of their abstention. The reasons for abstention go far beyond the immediate issue at hand and are enveloped in deep Chinese strategic interests. The abstention in no way lessens their intention in firmly maintaining close and mutually beneficial strategic ties with Russia.

It has been stated Chinese policy that a fundamental aspect of international law is the proviso that the territorial integrity of nation states must not be violated. China has been fairly consistent in this approach. China opposed the creation of Bangladesh, as much as it did the NATO bombing of Serbia which ultimately led to the subsequent separation of Kosovo from Serbia. China along with Russia and India did not recognize the separation of Kosovo. Thus while taking a formal position on the question of the territorial integrity of nation states; Chinese policy on the other hand has also been quite realistic. China subsequently recognized Bangladesh as an independent state; is quiescent over Kosovo and in all probability will recognize the Crimea as a part of Russia if Chinese press coverage is any indication, but albeit after a decent interval.

This obvious dichotomy of approach in Chinese policy has as its genesis fears about the viability of its own territorial integrity. China has land frontiers with 14 countries [13; if POK is discounted] and although the population of non-Han minorities is only about 100 million, yet the minorities occupy nearly one-half of the Chinese landmass. Han Chinese constitute nearly 90 per cent of China's total population and are ethnically fairly homogenous. But the two important minority areas of Tibet and Xinjiang that abut India and the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan make the Chinese extremely sensitive on any developments in these two areas. History shows that Inner Asia with Tibet located at its strategic epicenter has suffered from periodical political upheavals. In the past Tibetan cultural and religious influence in Central Asia was significant. Despite

enormous efforts put in over the years China has still not been able to pacify Tibetan aspirations for complete autonomy or even independence. There have been 126 self-immolations by Tibetans since 2009 in protest against Chinese rule. China has tried everything from brutal crackdowns to economic sops and yet the Tibetan yearning for independence just not died down to China's utter exasperation.

In Xinjiang, local communities overlap with those of the Central Asian states and their cultural, religious and ethnic affinities with their kin across borders are strong. The commitment of these communities to the Chinese Central government is rather weak. Therefore administrative and political control in Xinjiang becomes problematical and cannot be divorced totally from the events in Central Asian republics. Last week the Chinese official media reported that more than 10 members of the Xinjiang 'separatist forces' knifed to death more than 29 civilians at Kunming Railway station; seriously injuring another 130. The Regional Public Security Bureau reported that about 190 such attacks have taken place in 2012, admitting to an increase over 2011 by a 'significant margin.' It has also been admitted that Uyghur 'separatists' have started attacking civilians instead of the 'symbols' of governmental authority such as police stations, police vehicles or regional party and government offices. The separatist Uyghur group led by Rebiya Kadeer, who is based abroad, has not yet achieved significant traction.

It is, therefore, obvious that the Chinese leadership is adamant that there can be no dilution of the concept of the principle of non-violation of the territorial integrity of nation states in the international system. To show any laxity in this regard would directly impact on its own domestic situation and its integrity as a nation state. The Russian claim that Crimea was 'stolen' from it does indeed have significant resonance in China; for that was also the Chinese position earlier that in the historical period of its 'national humiliation' significant Chinese territories were 'stolen' from it by the then imperialist powers. Fortunately for countries situated on China's periphery, except for the notable exceptions of India and Bhutan, all of China's land borders have been settled by the People's Republic.

On the other hand, Chinese strategists sitting in Beijing would not be too unhappy at the turn of events in Eastern Europe. With increasing signs of rising tension between Russia and the western powers led by the United States; the attention of the US would increasingly focus on Russia. The so-called Russian threat is likely to become an issue in US domestic politics, with each candidate for US Congressional elections slated for later this year likely to take extreme positions. Already both former Secretary of State Clinton and Vice-President Biden, with aspiring Presidential ambitions, have utilized this issue to promote their candidacy with hard rhetorical flourishes against Russia. With Putin and Russia as their foremost targets; China in Asia would seem rather far away.

Xi Jinping is due to visit Western Europe from 22 March-1 April 2014 and would also be the first Chinese President to visit EU headquarters in Brussels. EU-China trade is booming at US \$ 560 billion and with increasing tension between Russia and Western Europe the leaders of Western Europe would undoubtedly assiduously court the Chinese.

Xi Jinping is assured of a fulsome ‘red-carpet’ treatment. It would be interesting to watch whether the European leaders raise the question of human rights violations in China, as they so regularly do, or in the context of their desire to further ‘isolate’ President Putin all such ‘inconveniences’ will now be brushed under the carpet?

For nation states of Asia on the periphery of China this too will be a testy period. The US seems far too preoccupied with the Arab-Israeli dispute, the Syrian imbroglio, the Iran nuclear question and now Putin’s aggressiveness over the Ukraine. Although quite sensibly President Obama has refused to get militarily involved over the Crimea, yet US foreign policy focus is perhaps once again reverting to being Europe-centric. This would be consistent with the logic that events in Europe are important political issues in domestic American politics.

Therefore what is the future of the US ‘pivot to Asia’? Has China, now courted by both Russia and the US, thus achieved a distinct strategic advantage by simply sitting on the side-lines?

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.