

# China treads cautiously after pro-US coup in Ukraine

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5 March 2014

The response of China to the US- and European Union-backed coup in Ukraine, and Russia's subsequent intervention to maintain control over the Crimean peninsula, is being closely monitored by political leaders and strategic analysts around the world. Any decision by Beijing to openly support Moscow's actions would dramatically escalate the global tensions that now exist.

To this point, the Chinese government has engaged in a diplomatic balancing act, refusing to condemn either the pro-Western coup or Russia's response. At a press conference in Beijing on Sunday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Qin Gang stressed "China's long-standing position not to interfere in others' internal affairs" and voiced support for Ukraine's "independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity"—without indicating who China believed had violated it. At a press conference the next day, Gang refused to voice support for Russia's actions, but equally refused to state whether China recognised the legitimacy of the coup-installed government in Kiev or to condemn the Russian incursion into Crimea.

In Russia, the Putin government and loyal media outlets portrayed China's stance as supportive. The Russian foreign ministry declared on Monday that Moscow and Beijing had "broadly coinciding views... in connection to the situation in Ukraine and around it." In the United States, by contrast, the *Wall Street Journal* highlighted the "noncommittal remarks" coming from the Chinese government.

China's manoeuvring continued yesterday in the United Nations Security Council. As American and European representatives issued bellicose denunciations of Russia and threatened unspecified retaliation, Chinese ambassador Liu Jieyi repeated the pro forma statement of China's support for "the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of another country" and "respect for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial

integrity."

Immense Chinese strategic and economic interests are threatened by the developments in Ukraine. For well over a decade-and-a-half, Beijing has carefully cultivated economic ties and military relations with Russia, embodied in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), initially to counter US interventions in Central Asia. As well as Russia, the SCO includes the former Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and has been the vehicle for China to pursue access to land-transported energy and raw materials, independent of the US-controlled sea lanes from the Middle East and Africa.

In recent years, China has extended its access to Eurasian resources further west. It has particularly sought to secure agricultural commodities from Ukraine to reduce its dependence on the US and close US allies such as Australia. In 2012, the Export-Import Bank of China lent \$US3 billion to Ukraine for agricultural development, with the loan to be repaid by exports of corn rather than currency. In June 2013, a major Chinese state-owned corporation signed an estimated \$2.6 billion, 50-year contract to lease as much as three million square hectares of Ukrainian farmland—the largest foreign land deal ever made by Chinese concerns. Produce is to be sold to Chinese buyers at fixed prices. The first 100,000 hectares of farmland, in the central Dnipropetrovsk region, is under production.

At the same time, China has made significant arms purchases from Ukraine, including its first aircraft carrier, now operational as the Liaoning.

Ukrainian-Chinese economic relations appeared set to massively expand after Victor Yanukovich's government announced on November 21 last year that it was abandoning a proposed "association agreement" with the European Union and would instead seek closer cooperation with Russia.

From December 3 to 6, as fascistic and right-wing organisations held pro-US, pro-EU and anti-government protests in Kiev, Yanukovich travelled to Beijing to sign more than 20 agreements that would bring tens of billions of dollars of Chinese investment into Ukraine.

As early as 2015, Chinese state banks were to start lending \$15 billion for housing construction. Some \$13 billion was to be invested on the construction of a new deep-sea port, grain export terminals and an associated industrial park in Crimea. The National Bank of Ukraine was to be provided with \$5 billion in Chinese renminbi, so trade could be carried out directly in the Chinese currency. Other projects included the construction of a gas-refining plant and further agricultural investments. In exchange, Ukraine committed to using Chinese construction companies, equipment and building materials, and significantly increasing agricultural exports to China.

The agreements signed with China would have been a factor in the decisions taken by the Obama administration and its European allies to step up their support for their proxy forces in Ukraine seeking to bring down Yanukovich's government.

US strategy since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 has been aimed at enforcing American dominance over the vast Eurasian landmass. This agenda has been pursued through a succession of wars, proxy wars and interventions, most notably Iraq (1991), the Balkans (1994–96), Serbia (1999), Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), the Ukraine “Orange Revolution” (2004) and the Georgia crisis (2008), as well as war scares on the Korean peninsula and with Iran.

As part of an agenda to weaken Russia, the US has actively sought the installation of a government in Ukraine that would orient toward the European Union and could potentially be brought into NATO.

In Asia, the Obama administration is pursuing a naked policy of undermining Chinese interests across the region. It has provocatively encouraged the Philippines and Japan to assert claims over disputed territories in the South and East China seas, to the point that the prospect of war between Japan and China is being openly discussed by both sides. The US “pivot” to Asia includes concentrating 60 percent of American naval and air forces in Asia and strengthening its military alliances with Japan and Australia, and its relations with India, in preparation for all-out war.

All the dilemmas that confront the Chinese ruling elite are brought into stark focus by the Ukraine crisis. Its

interests and ambitions are being blocked and thwarted by US imperialism in every part of the world.

The Beijing regime has historically opposed the dismemberment of existing national states, due to its concerns that separatism among its own ethnic minorities could be stoked by the US to provoke internal instability or even to break away entire swathes of territory from China. At the very centre of its foreign policy is the insistence that, regardless of the views of the population in Taiwan, the island is an inseparable part of China that must be reunified with the mainland.

Beijing is acutely conscious that if it gave any support to referendums on the separation of Crimea or other Russian-controlled areas from Ukraine it would provide grist to the mill for agitation that Taiwan, Tibet, the western Uighur-populated province of Xinjiang and potentially even Hong Kong be given votes on independence. It would also effectively guarantee that the new regime installed in Kiev would repudiate the agreements that China signed with Yanukovich just three months ago—though that may well take place on the dictates of Washington and the EU anyway.

At the same time, the aggressive US stance in Asia has made the Chinese ruling elite even more dependent on Russia as its only potential ally and supplier of energy and raw materials in the event of conflict. Chinese leaders now face a concerted drive by the US and EU to not just install a puppet government in Kiev, but to isolate, weaken and ultimately collapse Putin's regime and reduce Russia to a semi-colonial status. China, they are well aware, would be next.

The relentless, reckless and ruthless pressure being brought to bear by US imperialism and its allies on the increasingly desperate Russian and Chinese ruling elites poses the danger of triggering military confrontations that escalate into nuclear war. It is a direct threat to the lives of hundreds of millions of workers and youth around the world that must be answered by the development of an international anti-war movement, based on a socialist perspective.



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