

CRISIS IN UKRAINE AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ASIA-PACIFIC



John Rogers

Major John Rogers recently completed the Advanced Security Cooperation Course (ASC14-2) and is a staff officer assigned to Headquarters Pacific Air Forces, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of APCSS, the U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

The crisis in Ukraine threatens to disturb the existing world order by establishing precedence for irredentist claims and emboldening nations to act without utilizing international security mechanisms. While the globe is punctuated by countless security flashpoints, those facing the Asia-Pacific are the most volatile, daunting and consequential. A rise of a new world order resulting from the Ukraine crisis has four immediate implications for the Asia-Pacific. First, it clouds judgment over territorial dispute resolution in the South China Sea (SCS) or East China Sea (ECS) and increases the potential for a strategic miscalculation that could lead to a regional crisis. Second, it threatens to halt progress toward ending the high-stakes nuclear standoff with North Korea. Third, it has caused Russia to further pivot toward China, expanding economic and military ties that threaten to change the balance of power across Northeast (NE) Asia. Fourth, the failure of the U.S. to uphold treaty obligations in Ukraine has further accelerated Japan's military expansion and is contributing to a rise of nationalism that threatens the stability of NE Asia.

The first implication specific to the Asia-Pacific is an increase in the opportunity for strategic miscalculation over a territorial dispute on China's periphery. Unlike Russia's relatively peaceful and unchallenged annexation of Crimea, a kinetic miscalculation over one of China's numerous territorial flashpoints would violently escalate between regional stakeholders.

On the surface, China stands to gain significantly from the crisis. Tensions in Ukraine not only distract the U.S. from advancing efforts to rebalance to the Asia-Pacific, but also create a power vacuum where an unchallenged China can be more demanding of its neighbors.ⁱ The Chinese phrase to "take delight in other's misfortunes" is *xingzai lehuo*.ⁱⁱ China not only benefits from how Ukraine lost territory, but also from the strategic implications of the treaty partners' unwillingness to respond with force. President Obama's recent trip to the Asia-Pacific was aimed at reassuring allies that the U.S. would support them in the face of an increasingly more aggressive China. While his reassurance was politically celebrated by defense treaty partners in the region, China potentially views this promise as a paper tiger: another red line the U.S. is willing to draw but reluctant to enforce. Only a week after President Obama's 2014 visit to the Asia-Pacific, China sent a flotilla of 80 ships to the South China Sea to erect an oil rig inside Vietnam's coastal exclusive economic zone.ⁱⁱⁱ This act sparked a large-scale maritime showdown and quickly spread into a deadly anti-Chinese riot across Central Vietnam.^{iv} The U.S. responded by condemning the Chinese

oil rig placement as “provocative,” but has taken no tangible action, making U.S. resolve – on the heels of a visit aimed at reassurance – appear hollow.

The second implication specific to the Asia-Pacific is the potential for increased hesitation by North Korea to surrender its nuclear arsenal in exchange for a security guarantee. As a part of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, Ukraine transferred its nuclear arsenal to Russia in exchange for a promise of protection from the U.S. and Britain. The unchallenged annexation of Crimea likely erodes North Korean confidence that a Western treaty partner would come to its aid under similar circumstances, or worse yet, it could restart a decades-silent regional nuclear arms race.^v At a time when tensions on the Korean peninsula are as high as they have ever been, U.S. reluctance to act decisively introduces a new degree of instability and removes near-term hope for détente.

The third implication specific to the Asia-Pacific is a strategic alignment between Russia and China that will cause a shifting balance of power in NE Asia. The steady decay of dialogue between the U.S. and Russia is a crisis moving in slow motion that threatens cooperation on broader issues such as improving NE Asian security and is consequently pushing Russia closer to China. Since the 2001 launch of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Sino-Russian relationship has steadily grown into a significant strategic partnership.^{vi} In 2012, trade between Russia and China topped \$90 billion while trade with the U.S. came in at \$26 billion.^{vii} Russian President Vladimir Putin has pledged to increase trade volume with China next year to \$100 billion and expects it to double by 2020.^{viii} As punitive western sanctions increase against Russia, the pace of Sino-Russian trade negotiations has accelerated rapidly. In May 2014, Putin completed a trip to China where he announced an oil/gas pipeline deal worth an estimated \$400 billion, a major step forward in achieving his shared vision of a strategic energy alignment.^{ix} Putin also announced intentions to conduct a joint Russian-Chinese Naval exercise in the coming weeks. The further expansion of military and economic ties between Russia and China decreases the likelihood of their cooperation on critical United Nations Security Council resolutions. Ultimately, a strategic alignment that polarizes western relations with Russia and China could reignite a regional arms race and disrupt the balance of power across NE Asia.

The fourth implication specific to the Asia-Pacific is the rise of an increasingly militaristic Japan. The U.S. decision to not intervene militarily in Ukraine provoked concern in Tokyo about America’s willingness to assist a treaty partner under attack. In response, Japan has exacerbated its militaristic tendencies by accelerating military spending and is proposing a change to Japanese law that include removing the constitutionally-imposed limitations that restrict the military actions of its self-defense force.^{x xi} In a time of dwindling military budgets and growing security commitments, strategists want Japan to play a larger role in regional security. However, this rise of military power amidst a backdrop of politically-stoked nationalism, ongoing territorial disputes and a recent memory of Japanese aggression in the last century, leaves neighbors in NE Asia uneasy and increases the possibility for a tactical miscalculation with strategic impacts.

Going forward, the U.S. must (1) reinforce its intent to honor the existing security treaty arrangements and reassure partners in the region that the U.S. remains committed to its Pacific rebalance, (2) engage Russia and seek new avenues of cooperation aimed at stabilizing the Korean

peninsula, and (3) modify U.S. policy approaches that force zero-sum decisions and alliances such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

President Obama's recent trip through Asia to reassure treaty partners and dissuade potential enemies marked a successful first step toward regional engagement. To continue expansion of assurances to our regional partners, the U.S. must increase regional military cooperation and focus on exercising key cooperative security contracts between these treaty partners. Regional military exercises must be timed to respond strategically to events such as an unprovoked territorial claim, to maximize their messaging value. China's recent pursuit of incremental gains by provoking a series of crises on its periphery suggests that it learned the wrong lessons from the annexation of Crimea. The U.S. – China relationship is the most important one in the 21st century, and now more than ever, the U.S. must remain engaged diplomatically. Expanding dialogue with China begins with military cooperation aimed at increasing military-to-military exchanges and collaboration centering on peace and humanitarian actions to foster a relationship focused on building trust and increasing alternative avenues of conflict resolution.

The post-Cold War NATO expansion efforts polarized Russia and ushered in an era of antagonistic relations. The U.S. must assist in expanding the regional security architecture to make Russia an inclusive partner and expand its role as a decisive stakeholder. As a starting point, U.S. efforts should focus on migrating security arrangements from a bilateral to multilateral context.

The U.S. must carefully consider the potential impact of supporting zero-sum policy efforts that drive world powers into conflict. The European Union (EU)'s Association Agreement set the stage for a showdown between Russia and the West in November 2013 by insisting that Ukraine choose between Russia and the EU. This agreement lacked a strategic off-ramp with provisions for Ukraine to follow a non-aligned movement such as that of Finland, allowing the West and Russia to deescalate tensions while saving face. In a similar policy blunder, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) threatens to divide the Asia Pacific landscape along economic lines without including China or Russia. While the U.S. celebrates the economic expansion opportunities of TPP, China views it as another "rebalance" measure aimed at containment. To preserve the critical Sino-U.S. economic relationship and expand avenues of cooperation with Russia, TPP must be fundamentally be revised.

The events leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 draw an ominous parallel to the recent history of Ukraine. In 1961, the U.S. administration's failure to respond firmly and decisively to Soviet aggression leading to its overnight division of Berlin, arguably encouraged the series of events that led the world to the brink of a nuclear war. During times of unprecedented escalation, such as the events leading to the Cuban Missile Crisis or those witnessed recently in Ukraine, U.S. policymakers must strategically exercise smart power deterrence while maintaining precise and consistent foreign policy messages across all mechanisms of government. If U.S. policymakers truly intend to make this an Asia-Pacific century, characterized by stability and cooperation, Washington must assert bold leadership by continuing the rebalance, expanding the U.S. forward presence and forging new multilateral security cooperation agreements.

END NOTES

ⁱ Rumer, Eugene. "What Are the Global Implications of the Ukraine Crisis." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. 27 March 2014. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/27/what-are-global-implications-of-ukraine-crisis/html>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Perlez, Jane. "China Flexes Its Muscles in Dispute with Vietnam." *The New York Times*. 8 May 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/09/world/asia/china-and-vietnam.html?_r=0

^{iv} "Not the usual drill." *The Economist*. 10 May 2014. <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21601879-tensions-mount-dangerously-contested-waters-not-usual-drill>

^v "Implications of the Ukrainian Crisis for the Asia Pacific." *Harvard International Review*. 3 April 2014. <http://hir.harvard.edu/blog/visitor/implications-of-the-ukrainian-crisis-for-the-asia-pacific>

^{vi} Sieff, Martin. "Ukraine crisis has China walking line between Russia and U.S." *Forum*. 12 March 2014. http://apdforum.com/en_GB/article/rmiap/articles/online/features/2014/03/12

^{vii} MacFarquhar, Neil. "Ukraine Crisis Pushing Putin Toward China." *The New York Times*. 20 May 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/20/world/europe/ukraine-crisis-pushing-putin-toward-china.html>

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Wan, William. "China, Russia sign \$400 billion natural gas deal." *The Washington Post*. 21 May 2014. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/china-russia-sign-400-billion-gas-deal/2014/05/21/364e9e74-e0de-11e3-8dcc-d6b7fede081a_story.html

^x Sieff, Martin. "Ukraine crisis has China walking line between Russia and U.S." *Forum*. 12 March 2014. http://apdforum.com/en_GB/article/rmiap/articles/online/features/2014/03/12

^{xi} "More flexibility for Japan's military?" *The Washington Post*. 18 May 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/more-flexibility-for-japans-military/2014/05/18>

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of APCSS, the U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

June 2014