

## XI, PUTIN AND THE TROUBLE WITH CRIMEA

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ALTHOUGH BEIJING has a long history of falling in and out of alliances with Moscow, Xi Jinping is giving the relationship a high and positive profile. He appears to admire the Russian leader, who he has characterised as having a similar personality to his own: ‘我和您性格很相似’. He made Russia his first destination for a foreign trip after becoming president, and his first foreign visit of 2014. Additional bilateral meetings at international summits such as BRICS (the association of the major emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 上海合作组织 and the G20, as well as Putin’s state visit to China in May 2014 mean Xi has spent more time with Putin than any other foreign head

of state. Xi’s attendance at the Winter Olympics in February in Sochi was a first for a Chinese president.

Amidst all this cosiness, the sudden Russian annexation of Crimea by referendum presented China with a conundrum. On the one hand, China’s relationship with this useful partner within the P5 (the permanent five members of the UN Security Council) is strategically important and favourable to itself. On the other, non-interference in the internal affairs of another state is a central principle of China’s foreign policy. Besides, and crucially, given its own issues with Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang, it does not support self-determination. The US State Department was not the only foreign observer to note the parallels.



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Source: Xinhua

China's official line was suitably vague: 'There are reasons for what is happening in Crimea.' It asked the parties to resolve the issue without violence, a worthy sentiment, but only possible if the Ukraine gave in. Beijing knew it had succeeded in balancing itself on the fence when both Russia and Ukraine thanked the People's Republic for its stance.

Yet, *The New York Times* reported in September that: 'Just before Russia annexed the Ukrainian region of Crimea last March, Mr. Xi called Mr. Putin and urged him to find a political settlement, according to Shi Yinhong, a professor of international relations at

Renmin University of China in Beijing.' There has been no hint of this in public. State media has even sided with Russia over the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, criticising Australia, the US and other western countries for their 'one-sided accusation'. But, as *The Times* article states, the conflict has been good for China in that it has been able to secure better terms from Russia for delayed energy deals and defence sales. As for territorial questions of precedent: the large authoritarian power got its way with limited collateral damage, and nobody was able to do much about it.

This text is taken from *Shared Destiny*, edited by Geremie R Barmé,  
Linda Jaivin and Jeremy Goldkorn, published 2015 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.