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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **Su Hao**

Episode 14: China's Perspective on the Ukraine
Crisis

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Haenle: You're listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World Podcast,” a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China’s foreign policy, international role, and China’s relations with the world. Brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, located in Beijing. I’m Paul Haenle, the director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I’ll be your host.

Today we’re very privileged to be speaking with Professor Su Hao, who is currently out of Beijing in Australia. I will be discussing with Su Hao China’s perspectives on the rapidly evolving situation in Ukraine. Professor Su Hao is one of China’s leading scholars in Chinese foreign policy and strategic studies, he is the director of the Asia Pacific Research Center and the Center for Strategic and Conflict Management at China Foreign Affairs University. Su Hao, thank you very much for joining us today.

Su Hao, as we’re speaking today, tensions are continuing to mount in Ukraine after months of government protests led to the collapse of the Ukraine government last week. Russia has dispatched troops to Crimea and tightened its control of the peninsula. Meanwhile the United Nations, NATO, and European leaders have convened emergency meetings to discuss their responses to Russia’s military occupation. The United States is threatening to isolate Moscow politically and economically if Putin does not withdraw forces and abide by international law. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is on his way to Kiev on Tuesday. Before we dive into the current crisis in Ukraine, I’d like to ask you to give us a bit of context about China’s relationship with Ukraine. Last year marked the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Ukraine. Can you describe for us China’s interests in Ukraine and the general features of the China-Ukraine bilateral relationship?

Su: Well, as you mentioned, China’s relationship with Ukraine is very important. Regarding China’s foreign affairs, on the one hand, [the] China-Ukraine [relationship], it’s very important, and China’s relationship with Russia is also of critical importance in Chinese foreign relations because [keeping] stable relations between China and Russia and China and Ukraine will be good for regional stability within their commonwealth and the independent states area. Number two, Ukraine is also very important [in regards to] its economic capacity and its geographic location between Asia and Europe. So in this regard, Ukraine holds strategic importance in Chinese concerns. Regarding bilateral relations with Ukraine, [the latter] is very important not only in industrial [terms], including its military industries and also some other important industries, like shipping industry which are all very important for China, but also their agriculture is very important for China.

Haenle: Thank you. Let’s turn to the crisis if we can. As you know, the crisis is rapidly evolving and the international community’s watching with great concern. Many are wondering what China’s position is and what China’s response will be to the crisis. The latest statement that I saw from the Chinese Foreign Ministry was rather ambiguous, explaining that China’s position is both to maintain principles of diplomacy and international norms while at the same time taking into consideration the history and the current complexities of the Ukrainian issue. So can you help us understand the Chinese government position and the view of the situation that has unfolded in Ukraine since this Fall and deteriorated even further since the middle of last month?

Su: Yes. At the moment the crisis in Ukraine also [illustrates] problematic relations between Ukraine and Russia. The Chinese feel the imbalance of the situation. On the one hand, China and Russia have a strategic partnership with each other, and on the other, Ukraine is also in a critical

position in China's foreign relations. So both countries are very important partners for China. But unfortunately at the moment there is a serious problem between Russia and Ukraine, so it makes China...[it's] not very easy for China to make a clear attitude—in other words, pick a side—with one or the other country. But I would say that, number one, China does hope to reduce tensions in this area; not just inside Ukraine, but also the relationship between Ukraine and Russia, because, at the moment, you know, Crimea is a part of Ukraine in the international arrangement [but] Russia, to some extent, [has] some military presence in Crimea. So, in this regard, I would say that China will be very cautious about that, because it is understandable on China's side.

Number two, Russia has strategic concerns in this area, including its strategic presence in the Black Sea, which is understandable to China. But we understand, otherwise, that it's a part of Ukraine. So with regards to international norms or international laws, China cannot violate or ignore these kind of international laws/norms. So we should appeal to both sides, especially Russia, to manage their crisis [and] to be very careful not to violate international norms. So that will provoke very strong [opposition] from the international community. So this is a Chinese concern, I think. But I think the international community should also remain cautious about that, because Russia still has their own security concerns for its internal stability. So if Crimea [becomes] a tension point between Russia and Ukraine, then for Russia internally it may be problematic, you know, for situations inside of Russia. So our international community should, to some extent, understand Russia's strategic internal concerns, regardless of Crimea.

Haenle: So, Su Hao, you've mentioned before the importance of the China-Russia relationship a number of times, and as we know, President Xi Jinping made his first trip abroad as China's leader to Russia in March of 2013 and said that China will make developing relations with Russia a priority in its foreign policy. On Monday of this week, Russia announced that Beijing and Moscow were in broad agreement. However, China in the past has also consistently opposed interference in other countries' internal affairs, so how do China's interests in this regard factor into this situation with Russia? Will the Chinese leadership accept a military invasion by Russia and interference in Ukraine sovereignty or do you expect the leadership in China to pressure or to urge President Putin to remove Russian troops?

Su: Yeah, that's true. Non-interference is a Chinese principle in its foreign policy. In Ukraine's case, it seems that Russia is interfering in Ukraine's affairs, which in this case means we have a situation that there are objectives to weigh. Because in Ukraine, this is a region, as I have said, that feels that it is a part of Russia and also Russia keeps a very strong tie with Ukrainians because there is very strong ties between Russia and Ukraine. So the international community—and it could be China—we should take, on the one hand and to some extent, an understanding attitude towards Russia, and on the other hand we should try to persuade or to appeal to Russia to pursue a peaceful way instead of a military way or by way of interfering with these issues.

Haenle: Even if there is no war, Su Hao, the Crimean crisis is likely to fundamentally alter relations between Russia and the West, and some believe that Russia and the West may be inching closer toward a new Cold War. What implications would this kind of development have for China, as it worked with the international community to begin to solve other important issues like Syria and Iran? What are the implications as you see them for China?

Su: Yeah, we really had suffered quite a lot in the Cold War period, and it is fortunate that the Cold War has ended. At the end of the Cold War, our international community became much better, because our relations between the traditional East and West and big powers [improved]. So we really have good and promising circumstances regarding our international development. I'm now in Brisbane, Australia, [and] this year there will be the G20 Summit here. So that means the international community and especially the big power relations [have already] become much better. So at the moment, the crisis in Ukraine [can have significant negative consequences]. If these issues cannot be resolved rationally and reasonably, that will [create] a serious problem, not only between Russia and Europe, Russia and the United States, but also with some other powers like China [who] will kind of be involved within these sorts of diplomatic issues. So I think our international community should take precaution about that and try to avoid any serious confrontation. So personally I would say that, number one, Western countries—I mean Europe and including the United States—should take responsible behaviors to maintain [a] peaceful situation; to not provoke or stimulate the emerging parties. Number two, maybe [China] could play a positive role/constructive role for both sides—Ukraine and Russia. Regarding Ukraine's case, I would say that it is understandable because Ukraine's people, they need to realize, so our international community could be [strengthened by granting them] citizenship to help them to try to create good institutions, economic and social institutions especially, to [help] the Ukrainians have a good future.

On the other hand, we also respect Russia's strategic concern, because it's provoking Russia's nerves. That's what made Russia take a stronger or maybe more irrational behavior [which could] make the situation worse. You know, I understand that China usually takes the reasonable way on this kind of issue. But it is a pity to me; maybe the United States or European countries take a more assertive way. So I would say that maybe the international community could [make] joint efforts to communicate with each other and [adopt a] joint behavior to collectively help reduce tensions.

Haenle: If Russia is allowed...there's a great deal of concern in the international community, about Russia undermining international law with respect to Ukraine. What are the consequences if Russia is allowed to undermine international law? Are there implications for Asia as well?

Su: Yes at the moment in theory or even in international norms, Russia is a problem because they have already interfered in the internal affairs of Ukraine. So I think that in this matter... we should not encourage this kind of tendency—that Russian behavior. So we should stress our international concern in the international community to Russian leaders and try to appeal to Russian leaders to take a moderate way rather than a radical way to interfere in internal affairs of Ukraine. With [regards to the] Ukrainian people, they have their own decision to make [with regards to] the direction of Ukraine's development in the future and also to manage their own affairs—their internal affairs and external affairs, regarding not only Ukraine and Russia relations but also Ukraine and European relations. So [we should] have [the] Ukrainian people make decisions for themselves [and] not interfere too much. That would not be a good manner [to conduct international relations].

Haenle: Su Hao, let me ask you finally, you know whoever takes over in Kiev will have a difficult road ahead, even without the ongoing Crimea crisis. Ukraine faces significant economic problems, many say it needs 15 billion dollars in new loans just this year. What do you see as the future of

Ukraine, in your opinion, and how can Ukraine balance its interests between the West and Russia better? Is there a role for China to play in better ensuring Ukraine stability?

Su: To me, it is very important that Ukraine does everything. We should not violate that expectation within Ukraine; that would be a miserable [outcome], not only in Ukraine but also to the international community. Our international community could help the Ukrainian people to take the path to gradually resolve their own problems. Our international community should [generate] more pressure on Ukraine. So I would say if the international community, [with regards to the] situation around Ukraine, could [play the role of moderator], the Ukraine people will take the time, step-by-step, to try and find the right way to enhance the national cohesion of Ukraine so that Ukraine has independence and [can benefit from the] unity of the nation. So I think that [maintaining] Ukraine's own cohesion as a nation is very important for our international community. In the future I do think that if the international community can take the rational way to manage this kind of a crisis, Ukraine could keep their own independence and also integrity.

Haenle: Well Su Hao, I want to thank you very much for spending time with us to discuss China's perspectives on the evolving situation in Ukraine. I appreciate you talking to me on the phone all the way over in Australia and look forward to seeing you back here in Beijing. That's it for this edition of Carnegie-Tsinghua's "China in the World" podcast. I encourage you to explore our website at www.carnegietsinghua.org and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Thank you for listening and be sure to tune in next time.