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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Episode 15: View From Moscow: The Ukraine
Crisis (Part I)

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Haenle: You're listening to the "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 here in Beijing. I'm Paul Haenle, the director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I'll be your host.

Today we're privileged to be speaking with my Carnegie colleague Dmitri Trenin about the current crisis in Ukraine. Dmitri is the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center and is speaking to us by phone from Moscow. Dmitri, thank you very much for speaking with us today.

Trenin: Thank you very much, Paul.

Haenle: Dmitri has been one of the leading voices helping the international community better understand the current crisis in Ukraine and the Russian perspective. Dmitri, we know you're very busy these days, and so we really appreciate you taking the time to join us.

Trenin: It's my pleasure.

Haenle: Let me start, Dmitri, in one of your most recent articles, entitled "The Crisis in Crimea Could Lead the World into a Second Cold War," you begin by warning that this is perhaps the most dangerous point in Europe's history since the end of the Cold War. You write that direct confrontation between Russian and Ukrainian forces will draw in the United States one way or another, and that while there is still time, it is extremely important to understand what each party is aiming for. Let's begin there. There seems to be a great deal of misunderstanding about the aims and the desires of the Ukrainian protesters who were in the Maidan, and the hopes and wishes of ordinary Ukrainians. Can you help us understand, Dmitri—what is it that Ukrainians want and what are their aims?

Trenin: Well Paul, let me first say that I need to have some humility when discussing Ukraine, a large country that really demands a special expertise. I'm not a Ukraine scholar and I cannot claim any special expertise simply because Ukraine for a few hundred years used to be a part of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. But from my perspective, from watching in Moscow, I see three elements of the Maidan—which is the name for the movement in Kiev, the capital, that toppled President Yanukovich in February this year. In my view, the Maidan had three main elements.

One is the common people, who were drawn to Maidan—which is Ukrainian for "independence," actually the full name is "Independence Square"—who were drawn there by their opposition to the corrupt—very corrupt—regime of President Yanukovich. In contrast to that corruption, they saw an alternative in drawing closer to the European Union. Europe to those people meant basically two things: much higher living standards than in Ukraine and the rule of law. So this is the most important in terms of the number of people involved element of the Maidan.

On top of the Maidan, there is—there used to be—a political icing which was composed of the opposition parties in the Ukrainian Parliament called the Rada. Now these parties have since the victory of the Maidan formed a new Ukrainian government. Now let me tell you very frankly that the parties making up the opposition were part of the same corrupt system that until recently had Mister Yanukovich and his clan in its ranks. If you like, it's the end of the regime for President Yanukovich but not the end of the political system which he used to be an integral part

of. These opposition figures had been on the political scene for a very long time, and some of them had been ministers in the previous government, some of them had been prime ministers, and all of them had been financed by the same bunch of oligarchs—very rich people who not only controlled the Ukrainian economy but also controlled the Ukrainian political parties through their own informal sanctions in the Rada. So that's the second element.

The third element in the Maidan is a new addition, if you like, to the Ukrainian political system: the radical forces from western Ukraine. Those people grouped in the Freedom Party and the Right Sector Group. They fielded the most potent elements in the Maidan "Self-Defense Force," who were in many cases very well-trained activists or militarists who engaged the riot police in very serious fighting and managed to kill a number of well-equipped, highly-protected riot policemen. So this is a very potent military force who have managed to get a hold of large stocks of ammunition and who are powered by the right-wing, nationalist ideology, which is rooted in the 1930s. So those are the three elements of the Maidan.

If I were to summarize that, just in one sentence, I think that most of the people in Ukraine, not just in the Maidan, want an end to corruption or at least curbing the corruption, and the institution of the rule of law, which would lead to better opportunities for those people—better living conditions.

Ukraine, it must be said, is the one country that in terms of its living condition has not progressed much since 1990, since the downfall of the Soviet Union. Everyone else—look at Poland, look at Russia, even look at Belarus—they've all gone up. Ukraine has been static, more or less. Now the opposition wants to reform while they are now in government, they want confirmation of that in a national election, and basically they want to move for the European Union. However, this is a very long haul given the conditions in Ukraine. These people are heavily dependent on the West. They are dependent for their political survival on Western economic assistance, on Western political backing. Their fate, however, will largely depend on whether they will be able to make living a little bit cleaner and a little bit better for most Ukrainians, which will be extremely, extremely difficult. And finally, the Nationalists would want to impose their own view of what Ukraine is, where it belongs, on the Ukrainian people as a whole. I think the Ukrainian people have been spoiled a lot by the close relationship with Russia—linguistic, cultural, mental—and they want that changed. They want a very different Ukraine from the one that has existed in the last few centuries.

Haenle: Dmitri you talked about the three main elements—a very complex mix of factors and dynamics. Can I ask you to draw out a little bit more the balance of interest within Ukraine between the West and Russia as they look at their future, and how does this factor into what has taken place in the Maidan in terms of their future desires and where they want Ukraine to go in the future. How is this delicate balancing act playing out?

Trenin: Well you need to appreciate that Ukraine is a very complex polity. It's a process of nation-building, and various parts of Ukraine have very different identities. The western regions are perhaps most nationalistic. Those western regions have never really formed a part of the Russian empire; they were only included in the Soviet Union at the time of Stalin during the Second World War. They feel that their brand of "Ukrainian-ness" rejects things Russian. Russian is essentially an enemy.

You also have the eastern and southern regions which until very recently were happy to live within Ukraine, but their cultural and linguistic identity was Russian. I walked around Odessa,

a major seaport on the Black Sea, and in the four days I was walking along the streets I only heard Ukrainian spoken once or twice, probably by visitors from the rest of Ukraine. But as I said they were happy to be Ukrainian citizens in this very loosely-governed, loosely-stitched together [place]. But right now the choices have become so much starker. A tilt toward Europe—not a political or ideological tilt towards Europe—[but] joining in a free-trade area with Europe... would probably mean phasing out much of Ukraine's Soviet-era industry, which survives because fairly low prices that the government charges them for gas. In that case, people understand and Russia made it very clear that an economic integration with Europe, even within their free trade area, would mean cutting many economic ties between Ukraine and Russia. The result is likely to be that a lot of people in southern and eastern Ukraine are likely to lose their jobs. And this is what makes people very anxious about their future. To them, a continuation of the present situation in which much of Ukraine's trade is with Russia—Ukraine trades more with Russia than the European Union—these people feel that they can lose even the few things that they have should Ukraine head West. So these people would be interested in continuing relations with Russia not because of linguistic or cultural affinities, but because of how they see their economic future.

Haenle: Dmitri, let me turn if I could to Russia, and talk about the Russian position. You wrote in an article in the *New York Times* on February 23 that you did not think that Russia would intervene or interfere in Ukraine. Now with Russia's intervention in Crimea the region is witnessing its biggest crisis since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Can you give us a sense of why you think Putin intervened in Crimea? Can you help us understand Putin's thinking a bit better?

Trenin: Well titles of articles are the privilege of the editors, and I had the good or bad fortune of writing at the crunch time. You said that the piece appeared on February 23, but I actually wrote it on February 21. Now in the night of February 21—actually in the morning of February 22—something fundamentally important and unforeseen by me happened, and that was that the agreement between President Yanukovich and the opposition—with the European foreign ministers acting as witnesses, in the presence of a Russian representative also—they signed an agreement that would've foreseen a gradual, delayed surrender of the Yanukovich regime, elections by the end of the year, a new Constitution, reduced power of the presidency, and so on. Now that agreement, despite its signature by the president and the opposition leaders, and some people say guarantees from the European foreign ministers, this agreement did not last more than a few hours. When they first presented it to the Maidan, and that's very important, a member of the Right Sector—a fairly lowly member of the Right Sector—stepped forward on the platform of the Maidan, and said we don't want that agreement. We want President Yanukovich out now. And the Maidan supported him, and the opposition withdrew its signature from the agreement, the European Union said nothing, and President Yanukovich fled the capital. That was so amazing, so dramatic, so unforeseen. So that to me was a sea change in Russia's policy toward Ukraine.

I argued and still argue that after that point Russia was pretty passive in its approach to Ukraine. It was trying to lure Yanukovich to its side, they showed him the stick first—showed how painful the severance of economic ties with Russia would be for Ukraine—and then they offered the carrot—in the form of a 15-billion-dollar assistance package plus a reduction in the gas prices. That was given to Ukraine no strings attached, as it were, just to help it go through a very difficult period in the hope, of course, that eventually Ukraine would become part of Mr Putin's Eurasian Economic Union.

Now what happened on the morning of February 22 was interpreted in Moscow as utter chaos descending on Kiev, and people in amazement saw no police in the street where there had been battles for days. They saw the Presidential Palace abandoned; there was no trace of President Yanukovich for a few hours. The only force in the street were the trained and armed people from the Right Sector who had their own enemies to chase. There were cars on fire, and things like that. So I think that Putin was persuaded that what was coming after this stand-off and this surprise would be something like “fascist dictatorship.” He has—and not only Putin—a lot of people who have looked at the ideological underpinnings of the Right Sector drew parallels between that very distinct brand of nationalism and the fascism of the 1930s. So the anxiety in the Kremlin was very high.

And then I think Putin—and I think even last year—stopped being 100 percent pragmatic on Ukraine. He adopted a civilizational perspective: to him Ukrainians and Russians were one people. So when he saw what he saw in Kiev on the morning of February 22, he received the message that ‘our own people are at risk, and we need to protect them from a bunch of fascist thugs.’ But he also had developed in the last couple years a historic vision of rebuilding the Eurasian power center, where virtually all of Ukraine—minus the western provinces if it must—fully belongs. In western Ukraine, Putin is absurd or perverse and he, I think, started to act as if he was presented with the national security threat of the first order on hands. What we saw in Crimea—the way the people reacted in Crimea against the new authorities in Kiev and the people who reacted in the eastern and western parts of Crimea—a lot of that was spontaneous. What was not spontaneous was the action of the Russian government. I think it had been a well-thought through, [was a] well-prepared reaction, and what we saw was an operation to secure Crimea, seal it off from Kiev, from the rest of Ukraine, so that whatever happened in Kiev would not touch Crimea. So that to me explains this change in Putin’s behavior from a high degree of passivity to going into high gear almost immediately, when he was surprised by something which had not been foreseen, when he had to react as if it was the most serious national security threat that he faced on the western borders of Russia. That’s my explanation.

Haenle: Thank you. You talk about the events on the Maidan on February 22 as having a significant impact on President Putin’s thinking with respect to what was happening in Ukraine. Can you give us a sense of whether or not it has changed to the extent that many people are asking, will Putin stop at Crimea, or is this a stepping stone? Do you have a sense of how President Putin’s thinking has evolved with regard to that question that many are asking?

Trenin: Well I think that for Putin, all of Ukraine, except for the several western provinces of Ukraine—I’ll refer to them as having never belonged to the Russian Empire and never fully socialized in the Soviet Union—the bulk of Ukraine belongs with Russia/Eurasia. As does Belarus, if not all of Moldova. I think that’s Putin’s worldview. Now what his aims are with regards to the rest of Ukraine, I think having secured Crimea—and I don’t think he will step back, I don’t think he will call off the referendum, he cannot formally do that—I don’t think that he would not accept what I think is likely to be the result of the referendum, in favor of reunification with Russia. It would be inconceivable for me that Putin would just say ‘no, we cannot accept that’ because of geopolitical reasons, or because the United States does not want us to have Crimea as part of the Russian Federation. But beyond Crimea, I think Mr Putin would prefer a federalized Ukraine, in which Ukraine’s various regions would have a large degree of autonomy—the western regions, southern regions, eastern and central regions—and Ukraine itself would

become a federation, which would prevent Ukraine, because of the importance of the eastern and southern regions, from going all the way to the West. Mr Putin's biggest worry, biggest potential threat with regard to Ukraine for many years has been Ukraine's potential membership in NATO. This is something that a federalized structure would be able to prevent. It would also be able to prevent the spread of nationalist, western Ukrainian ideology on the whole country. It would protect the use of the Russian language in the areas where Russians form either a majority or a significant portion of the population. And that would also protect some of the economic ties between Russia and Ukraine. So I think that's Putin's objective with regard to Ukraine. For him, Ukraine is not lost. Ukraine is something worth fighting for, worth supporting pro-Russian elements in Ukraine. For Putin, this is fully legitimate in the sense of supporting, as he would put it, supporting "Aron." Ukrainians and Russians, he said, are one people, after all.

Haenle: Dmitri, I want to turn now to the West and the United States. As you have predicted, the United States has been drawn into this conflict. You and our Carnegie colleague Andrew Wise recently argued that Western appeals for Russian restraint are unlikely to resonate. Why is it in your view that Western threats of isolation, sanctions, other measures, are unlikely to be effective? Why is the West unable to isolate Putin?

Trenin: Well I think that the West can isolate Putin as a person from itself. There's unlikely to be a G8 Summit chaired by Putin in Sochi, as the summit was planned for June this year. There may be fewer summits between Putin and other Western leaders. I think a lot of people in the West will shun Putin and members of the Russian government, so you only deal with them when you absolutely need to deal with them. Maybe you would prefer the phone to a direct encounter because you wouldn't want to be photographed with the Russian president. I think this is something that is not only possible but is actually happening. Now isolating Russia is a much more difficult task and is something that would come with a price tag. I think the price tag will be the biggest for Europe, which does depend on Russian energy supplies to a significant degree. But Europe also sell a lot of stuff to Russia. Russia is a big market, and a lot of Europeans—for example automobile companies—would not want to lose the Russian market. Russia is also the provider of some important ingredients, such as titanium, for the Western aircraft industry, including the Russian element of the Boeing company. The technological center that Boeing has in Russia is the biggest technological center that Boeing has anywhere in the world outside of the United States. That's just a few examples. There are very important trading links that neither side wants to sever at this point. I'm not saying they will be protected, but it'll be difficult.

Haenle: One country that does not appear to be moving to isolate Russia or to shun President Putin is China. Last week on the podcast we interviewed leading Chinese scholar Doctor Su Hao about China's perspectives. China has remained on the sidelines of the crisis and appears torn over its interests and loyalties, where they lie. On the one hand, as you know, China dislikes interference in others' internal affairs. On the other hand, it does not want to overtly support the overthrow of incumbent regimes and it also dislikes what it views as Western support for dissidents and color revolutions. So China looks to be playing a delicate balancing act, with what I would say is a slight lean towards bringing the United States down a notch. I'm wondering, Dmitri, how the Chinese position has been seen from Russia, and does Russia see China as being supportive, or are they disappointed by the lack of a more firm supportive stance from the Chinese leadership? How is it viewed in Russia?

Trenin: Paul, one maxim that is being repeated in Russia is the phrase authored by Emperor Alexander III of Russia, who died 120 years ago this year, which reads “Russia has only two friends in the world: its army, and its navy.” China is not seen as an ally of Russia under these circumstances. China, I think, is perceived as a country which is doing what is best for itself in any circumstances. A country that walks by itself—a hugely important country—that walks on its own. The reasons that you have described as informing the Chinese position I think are very well-understood here. There is no urge for Chinese support in this situation, but I think that if Russian-Western relations (i.e. Russian-American and Russian-European relations) deteriorate to a significant degree, as I would expect them to unfortunately, there will be more reliance on the Chinese in Russia for a number of reasons and in a number of areas, from economic to geopolitical. Then the trick for Russia will be to exploit this very important relationship, expand this relationship, but not in such a way as to become more dependent on Beijing. Again I said it’s not going to be easy, but of all important nations in the world, China will be, I think, the only one in which relations will not be [affected]—well India may be another but Chinese is at this point more important to Russia than India in economic and geopolitical terms. So China will be the most important major power to Russia, and its importance will grow. If, for example, there are more difficulties for Gazprom in the European market, the issue of gas prices for China may be resolved easier and more on Chinese terms. That’s just one example.

Haenle: Thank you. Well that’s it for this edition of the Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World” podcast. If you’d like to read Dmitri’s analysis and updates on the crisis in Ukraine, I invite you to explore Carnegie–Moscow Center’s website: www.carnegie.ru. And follow Dmitri on Twitter, where he is very active at @DmitriTrenin. Thank you for listening and be sure to tune in next time.