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Asia Summary

China and Russia at the United Nations

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INTRODUCTION

This document is a meeting summary of *China and Russia at the United Nations*, delivered by Dr Peter Ferdinand, Reader in Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick, on 28 May 2013 at Chatham House.

Dr Ferdinand discussed long-term trends in voting convergence by Russia and China in the UN General Assembly and more recent trends in their diplomacy in the UN Security Council. The event was chaired by Lord Williams of Baglan, Acting Head of the Asia Programme. The meeting consisted of a 30-minute talk by Dr Ferdinand, followed by a questions and answers session.

The presentation was on the record, and the views expressed are those of the participants and do not represent the views of Chatham House.

PETER FERDINAND

Dr Ferdinand began his presentation by pointing to the wide-ranging behaviour of United Nations member states. He noted that Mexico has not voted 'no' on a single resolution in the UN General Assembly since 1982 and that Brazil has not cast a 'no' vote since 1985. In contrast, from 1974 to 2008, the United States voted 'no' on 1,900 UNGA resolutions.

In order to explain the similarity in Russian and Chinese voting patterns on UN resolutions, Dr Ferdinand pointed a number of trends that indicate a convergence in Chinese and Russian foreign policies.

- Since 2003, there has been greater convergence in Russian and Chinese views of the Western (especially American) dominance of the UN and other international organizations.
- This convergence has been reinforced since 2009 by a more activist China and since 2012 by a more defensive-minded Russia. It has been further strengthened by a broad range of annual bilateral meetings between both governments
- However, Dr Ferdinand wondered if we should understand the voting convergence as an 'axis of convenience' rather than conviction?

China and Russia also maintain common objectives for the role of the UN in international affairs. These goals include:

- Maintaining and if possible strengthening the role of the Security Council;
- Strengthening the UN in and as part of a more multipolar world, a goal that has recently been taken up by the BRICS states;
- Attaching considerable importance to their status as P5 members, which grants to China and Russia esteemed status in international affairs, in contrast to other rising powers such as India or Brazil; and
- Using the UN as a platform to promote their global interests and their reputation as responsible powers

Many of Russia's interests at the UN align with those of China. These interests include:

- Protecting sovereignty, autonomy and its independence of decision-making;
- Maintaining geostrategic balance and national security;
- Cultivating a favourable international image and status as a responsible member of the international community and a great power;
- Promoting national economic and political interests;
- the conviction that Chapter VII operations must have the consent of governments against which they are directed, except where UN agencies can show clear evidence of breaches of UN rules;
- Support for government efforts to promote social and economic development, with stability prioritized over human rights; and
- Upholding and strengthening of the rule of law in international relations.¹

Despite the high degree of convergence in Russo-Chinese goals and interests, nuclear proliferation to Iran has proved a divisive issue. China's interests regarding Iran, outlined below, are as contradictory as those of Russia. China has sought to:

¹ Derived from Yang, S.X., *China in the UN Security Council Decision-Making in Iraq*, Routledge 2012, p.188; Odgaard, L., *China and Coexistence*, Woodrow Wilson Centre Press & John Hopkins University Press, pp.129-30.

- Cooperate with the United States as a responsible partner on the issue of Iran,
- Prevent nuclear non-proliferation,
- Support Iran against US diplomatic pressure,
- Promote good relations with Iran,
- Expand economic cooperation with Iran and deflect sanctions,
- Facilitate the flow of dual-use technologies to Iran,
- Cooperate with Iran to strengthen its military capabilities, and
- Try to mediate between the United States and Iran

Having identified points of convergence and divergence in the Russo-Chinese relationship, Dr Ferdinand examined the P5's voting patterns between 1974 and 2008. During this period, 3,396 votes were cast in the General Assembly.

Noting that 1974 was the year that China first assumed an active role in the UN, Dr Ferdinand observed that:

- China votes yes more often than any other P5 member;
- Russia is slightly less likely than China to vote yes, but still does so about three-quarters of the time;
- Even during the time of the Sino-Soviet dispute (1960s–1980s), China and Russia voted together at least 70 per cent of the time;
- The United States votes yes least often and the American tendency to vote against GA resolutions dates from the 1970s, when the United States became increasingly disenchanted with the UN as an international forum;
- There is great convergence in British and French voting patterns;
- The voting records indicate a general trend towards convergence between China and Russia;
- There is greatest voting convergence between the United Kingdom and France, then between China and Russia;
- There is greatest voting divergence between the China and the United States, then between Russia and the United States; and

- Voting records before and after 1992 (see Appendix, Table 3) indicate that the fall of the USSR did not have a significant impact in practice

Dr Ferdinand compared the P5's voting records on General Assembly resolutions (1974–2008) to those on Security Council resolutions (2000–12). He observed that states cast fewer 'no' votes in the Security Council, as Security Council members engage in extensive diplomatic activity to achieve coordination. He pointed out that P5 states cast 'yes' votes at least 97 per cent of the time during the period examined. Dr Ferdinand also noted that the United States has cast more vetoes than any other P5 state over this period (11).

Dr Ferdinand suggested that a strong support for the principle of national sovereignty often determines when China and Russia veto Security Council resolutions. He pointed to recent joint vetoes on Myanmar (2007), Zimbabwe (2008), and Syria (2011–12.)

However, he indicated that Russo-Chinese support for the principle of non-interference in national sovereignty is not absolute. He noted the following.

- In 2003, China and Russia accepted the UN peacekeeping force in Iraq. However, the Chinese government was internally divided on the issue.
- In 2011, they accepted UN military intervention in Cote d'Ivoire.
- In 2010, Russia cancelled S-300 missile air defence system for Iran, under pressure from US and Israel.
- In 2010, Russia and China voted in favour of resolution imposing sanctions on Iran.
- In 2011, Russia and China voted in favour of no-fly zone in Libya (in contrast to votes on Syria in 2011–12.)
- China has occasionally voted in favour of UN resolutions criticising North Korea's nuclear programme.

Dr Ferdinand offered a number of reflections on the data examined in his presentation. While China and Russia are not implacably opposed to the concept of 'Responsibility to Protect,' their support is more likely when the relevant regional organization concurs in advocating Security Council action (for example, the Arab League and the African Union supported the Security Council mandate for intervention in Libya.) This implies that the legitimacy of

the Security Council in sanctioning international interventions may depend on agreement from regional or other organizations; without such agreement, UN-mandated interventions would reflect a persistent Western dominance in international affairs.

Moreover, China and Russia insist upon exhausting all diplomatic opportunities for the resolution of conflict before the use of force is contemplated. This position suggests that China and Russia expect the UN to mediate, not lead: the UN's association with partial interventions may hinder its role as a mediator in future conflicts. Thus Russo-Chinese expectations about the role of the UN in international affairs differ from those of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question

China has recently increased its commitment to UN peacekeeping missions. Will more blue helmets change China's response to international crises?

Peter Ferdinand

Dr Ferdinand noted that, in gross terms, China has maintained a relatively significant number of troops on the ground in UN peacekeeping missions. He suggested that China's experience in peacekeeping reflects the way in which it is still learning how to operate within the UN.

Question

China appears to be the dominant partner in the Russo-Chinese relationship at the UN. Is that the case?

Peter Ferdinand

Citing Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of *Russia in Global Affairs*, Dr Ferdinand argued that Russia often takes the leading role on determining Russo-Chinese positions on affairs in the Middle East.

Question

How do proposed reform of the Security Council relate to Russo-Chinese ideas about changing power dynamics in a multipolar world?

Peter Ferdinand

Dr Ferdinand said that China and Russia lost interest in the discussion about UN reform after the failure to pass a resolution on the issue in 2005. The consensus of P5 members is that UN reform in the future should be gradual; of course, gradual reform would not entail a radical change such as the restructuring of the Security Council.

Dr Ferdinand noted that the rise of the BRICS has made the issue of UN reform all the more salient. However, while the United States has indicated its support for Indian, and possibly Brazilian, membership in the Security

Council, China and Russia have merely indicated a vague interest in allowing other BRICS states to assume an 'enhanced role' in the Security Council.

Question

Are the Chinese and Russian leaderships concerned that they might experience reputational damage by voting together?

Peter Ferdinand

Dr Ferdinand said that he believes that Chinese and Russian leadership are cognizant of potential damages to their international reputations. He also argued that Chinese and Russian policy is not driven by national interests and reputational concerns alone and supposed that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is not deaf to humanitarian concerns in Syria.

Referring to Bobo Lo, Dr Ferdinand indicated that mistrust persists between China and Russia. China's commitment to strategic autonomy and rejection of alliances means that partner states like Russia can never be sure of China's loyalty. China wants its partner states to practice monogamy, but China wants to practice polygamy.

Question

How do the personal relationships between the Chinese and Russian administrations impact Russo-Chinese relations at the UN and elsewhere? Will these relationships change with the new Chinese leadership?

Peter Ferdinand

Dr Ferdinand supposed that personal relationships between Chinese and Russian leaders do impact cooperation. The nature of personal relationships may have been a more significant factor during Vladimir Putin's first two terms in office. During that time, Russian leadership was particularly confident due to economic stability and the flow of oil wealth, while President Hu Jintao was risk-averse and willing to follow Putin's lead.

Today, however, China under President Xi Jinping is more assertive. We see this assertive position most clearly in China's policy towards its neighbours. In contrast, Putin is more defensive-minded. The shifting balance in the Russo-Chinese relationship reflects these developments.

Dr Ferdinand affirmed that regardless of changes at the level of leadership, the Russo-Chinese relationship will not collapse: great commitment has been made to strengthening bilateral ties. However, the extent to which Chinese and Russian leadership accept and adapt to each other's changing perspectives will significantly impact the balance of power between them.

Question

Does China experience regret at following Russia's lead?

Peter Ferdinand

Dr Ferdinand indicated that Chinese leadership is more disenchanted with the United States, the United Kingdom and France than with its closest ally in the Security Council, Russia. China is generally more wary of going along with Western initiatives, and will remain most watchful of the other P5 members.