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Don't Push China and Russia Together

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One of the more notable results of Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea is how unenthusiastic the Chinese government has been about that development. In a piece at [China-U.S. Focus](#), I describe Beijing's reaction as one of "nervous ambivalence."

Moscow's policy regarding Crimea sets extremely dangerous precedents from China's standpoint. Amputating the province of a neighboring state through military occupation and a subsequent referendum to give the "secession" a façade of legitimacy, triggered multiple alarm bells in Beijing. Russia's Crimea annexation violated China's repeatedly stated position emphasizing respect for the territorial integrity of all states as a key principle of international behavior. Beijing's emphasis on that principle is hardly surprising, given its own territorial issues involving Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan. The last thing Chinese leaders want to encourage is a precedent whereby one or more of those entities might seek secession with the assistance of a hostile foreign power or combination of powers.

Unfortunately, U.S. officials are apparently oblivious to opportunities to exploit China's nervousness. Instead, Washington seems determined to adopt measures that are likely to push Beijing and Moscow together. Obama administration officials have thrown diplomatic temper tantrums because Beijing has joined Moscow in resisting U.S.-led efforts to unseat Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and impose increasingly harsh economic sanctions on Iran. On one occasion, Susan Rice denounced Chinese and Russian vetoes of a UN resolution on Syria, proclaiming that her country was "disgusted." She added that those actions were "shameful" and "unforgivable."

Washington's position regarding China's territorial disputes with neighboring states in both the South China and East China seas has been even clumsier and more provocative. The Obama administration has exhibited none-too-subtle, backing of Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and other rival claimants. Beyond such specific issues, China shares Russia's growing worries about Washington's dominant position in international affairs. Beijing is concerned that the United States and its allies are using their military and economic advantages to encroach upon important interests of China and other major powers in the international system. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel's visit to China has not improved matters. A series of testy exchanges culminated with a pointed warning from Defense Minister Chang Wanquan that efforts to "[contain](#)" China will never succeed.

Henry Kissinger once observed that it should be a crucial objective of U.S. foreign policy to make sure that Washington's relations with Beijing and Moscow are always closer than their relations with each other. U.S. officials are violating that wise approach. It is a dubious strategy to pressure either China or Russia over matters that are not vital to U.S. interests. Both Crimea and the East Asian islands disputes fit that description.

But as unwise as it would be to antagonize either power over such stakes, it would be utter folly to antagonize both of them simultaneously. Yet Washington is now in serious danger of making that blunder. At a minimum, U.S. officials need to carefully think through their priorities and not push China and Russia together into an anti-U.S. alliance.

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