

# The Two Faces of Russia Foreign Policy Toward China and Taiwan

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## ABSTRACT

Russia, as one of the key actors in international politics, faces problematic issues in Chinese-Taiwan Relations. As a significant player, Russia reserves a close and stable relationship with China. However, Russia could not avoid Taiwan's significant role in Northeast Asia, especially its role in allying with the West. Taiwan undoubtedly offers a promising prospect for the Russian economy, but political relations with Taiwan could not significantly contribute to Russian FP. In this paper, Russian foreign policy will be examined on both sides, Russian foreign policy toward China and Russian foreign policy toward Taiwan. The purposes of this paper are trying to analyze the Russian foreign policy dilemma toward China-Taiwan relation. The analysis of this paper will focus on President Vladimir Putin as the decision-maker and explore all circumstances that will influence the decision-making process. The level of analysis implemented in this paper is domestic politics that significantly contribute to Russian foreign policy decision-making. This paper will gather secondary data from the news, journal, and book as the primary sources. The paper's outcome analyzes Russian foreign policy's dilemma and explores how Russian foreign policy toward China-Taiwan relations' current dynamics.

**Keywords:** *Russia, foreign policy, decision making, Vladimir Putin, China, and Taiwan*

## INTRODUCTION

Russia is a country that still has a sphere of influence as a 'superpower' country. Despite the economic crisis and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia is still considered to become the key player in international politics (Lo, 2015: 72). However, Russia's influence has already changed dramatically since the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, Soviet Union was the patron of all communist states, including China and North Korea. Russia still becomes a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. This position is a strong

indicator to define how the Russian Foreign Policy formulated. Many experts believe that the extent of Russian influence in international politics had decreased significantly, Russia is still maintaining its position as the key player in international politics. Russia, to some degree, still has a significant interest in international politics. The interest also varies by the regions or countries, such as conventional security issues, nuclear weapons, energy, economic, and politics.

Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia is experiencing the significant degradation of Russian power in global politics. As the former superpower country that became patronage of all of the communist countries in the world. However, with the fall of communism, Russia still has a vital interest in Northeast Asia, especially China. Russia has been aware that China's economic sector has been growing tremendously after the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the massive growth of China and Western dominance toward the Northeast Asia region, Russia has faced a complex problem, which already growing for a couple of years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The geopolitical problem is the one problem that makes Russia intensify its economics to support Russia's Far East region to develop economically (Dueben, 2013: 62). This policy makes Russia's leadership under President Putin consider an economic partnership with several Northeast Asia countries, such as China, Japan, and South Korea.

Moreover, the expansion of NATO in Northeast Asia also increases the insecurity of Russia. Russia admitted that NATO had become the primary source of insecurity and threat to Russia's interest toward Northeast Asia (Dueben, 2013: 68). With the ongoing conflict and territorial disputes in Northeast Asia, such as South China Sea dispute, Korean War, and the Senkaku Islands disputes, Russia intended to increase the extent of partnership with China because of the growing insecurity caused by those problems. With all of this consideration, I propose the research question: To what extent has Russia developed an economic partnership with China to support its economic reform? Moreover, How Russia respond to the growing insecurities between China and Taiwan?.

## **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Russian Foreign Policy Reform And Partnership With China**

With the longstanding communist economic system implemented in Russia, changing to a more liberal economic system was never easy for Russia. After abundant stagnation in the 1990s, Russia has trapped in the financial crisis until the

present day. To respond to this problem, Russia has been intensifying its economic partnership with China since the financial crisis in 1998 (Ivanov, 2002: 122). Russia, in this case, was expecting Europe to integrate with Russia and rescue Russia from the crisis. Unfortunately, with the growing economic development of the European Union, Russia was expelled from the European economic community (Trenin, 2001: 285). Russia considered that Eurasian integration had severely failed. Russia did not have many choices after the rejection from the E.U. membership, except to consider the significant economic power in Asia, which is China. China, in this case, has been experiencing economic growth and succeeded expand its economy throughout Asia. With this condition, Russia, with unstable relations with China, started to initiate significant foreign policy changes.

The partnership with China was an excellent alternative to boost the economic activity in Russia. Russia could sell its product to China and expand the export sectors. The primary commodities that China is very interested in were oil and arms (Goldman, 2008: 78). With the export to China, Russia could improve the income and preserve economic stability. Russia has a longstanding reputation as a weapon dealer and oil producer. With strengthening oil and arms exports to China, Russia expects China will become the most valuable consumers of Russian products (Goldman, 2008: 79). From the China perspective, Western countries military embargo toward China as the response to the Tiananmen Square incident, China need to pursue another arms dealer. Russia was a competent arms dealer that has a reputation as good as Western states, especially the U.S. The primary revenue from petroleum and weapons export is just one advantage. With an economic partnership with China, Russia also expected to gain more economic improvement in the Far East region and stimulating trade with former Soviet countries in Central Asia (Laqueur, 2015: 199). China could become a 'liaison' in terms of expanding Russian diplomacy. However, the significant improvement of China's economy will be viewed as a rivalry, especially when Russia has a little bit fall behind China in leadership in Asia.

The most progressive change in intensifying China's partnership was the Primakov's doctrines (Park et al., 2013: 129). In the political aspect, the doctrines focused on changing Russia's foreign policy to a more sensible and flexible approach. In the context of the post-cold war constellation, Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov was aware that the Russian power's degradation in world politics needs to be adopted in the foreign policy changed. Russia has to admit that Western domination could not contend. Therefore, Primakov's doctrine was more

focused on creating a multipolar constellation on world politics, in which that Russia could have more influence than making a unipolar constellation (Trenin, 2001: 283-284). In the political aspect, Russia still has the position as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. This position is still prestigious for many states, including China. With ongoing disputes involving China, Russia will become an essential source of legitimation for China in solving territorial disputes. In exchange, Russia will have a strategic economic partner also a loyal consumer of Russian strategic industries products.

Vladimir Putin is a very ambitious President, and he was aware of the decline of Russian power after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Putin has been inspired to extend Russian power and regain legitimacy as a superpower nation (Laqueur, 2015: 232). Unfortunately, Russia is not in good condition right now. Russia has a severe economic crisis that harms the economy, and the failure of Eurasian integration also makes the economic crisis more harmful. Putin also was with the extension of NATO influence in Asia, especially Northeast Asia (Lo, 2015: 89). With this condition, Putin tried to contend NATO's superiority through gathering China as a Russian ally and invite other East Asian and Central Asian countries to join a partnership with Russia. China was the most valuable country in Asia. Despite the U.N. Security Council's permanent memberships, the Chinese military and economy's emerging is precious for Russia. Through a partnership with China, Russia expects to secure its region in the Northeast and the Far East, which directly border with China. Russia could maintain its security by making China its ally because of China's significant influence in Asia.

Additionally, the dominance of NATO only could be contended by the alliance of Russia and China. China and Russia have a strategic sea territorial, which connects vital trade and strategic routes (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2014: 140). Through the US Pacific Command, NATO has dominated the South China Sea as its territory securing Japan and South Korea from the influence of China and Russia.

Based on this fact, Putin was aware that maintaining a good relationship with China is vital in Russian diplomacy. Moreover, China also could contribute significant advantages for preserving the balance of power in the Pacific Ocean. Russia is not the Soviet Union anymore. Russia's weakening influence becomes a psychological justification for maintaining a partnership with China (Laqueur, 2015: 233). With the exclusion of Russia from the E.U. economic and strategic partnership. Russia will need China more than before because of Chinese military power to help Russia create balance within its region. Still, through Chinese military influence,

Russia also has more bargain to persuade the former Soviet States to join in the regional partnership with Russia (Oliker et al., 2009: 117). Russia still has a strong military and its nuclear arsenal. However, psychologically, without collaboration with China, Russia is not capable enough to contend with NATO's dominance in Northeast Asia. Russia could not afford the bandwagon policy alone because of the decline of its power and minimum influence in Asia (Oliker et al., 2009: 118). Therefore, a partnership with China could become a great source of confidence for Russia to bandwagon NATO in Asia and secure its border from the insecurities. China's current strategic position also possibly becomes more significant in building regional security complex in Southeast Asia and East Asia simultaneously.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **The Dilemma of Russia-Taiwan Relation**

The Taiwan issue caused the rift between the Soviet Union and China in the 1950s (Wilson, 2009: 293-294). This major rift deteriorated after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of President Yeltsin. Yeltsin considered that China was a communist state and yet also a repressive state. Yeltsin preferred to consider Taiwan a better alternative than China, in which that Taiwan had a more democratic system and more stable economy. Yeltsin insisted that Russia and Taiwan should maintain diplomatic ties and disregard China. This diplomatic move made Taiwan take the opportunity seriously and decided to arrange arms purchasing in 1992 (Wilson, 2009: 295). With the powerful intention of Russia to maintain the diplomatic with Taiwan, China responded with full cautions. The most critical moment was when the Taiwanese government took the bold steps to build several representative offices in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. In response to Taiwan's diplomatic steps, China objected strongly and initiated protest to the Foreign Minister, Oleg Lobov. During this time, the diplomatic relation between Russia and China is at the lowest point. With the flaws of Yeltsin's view regarding China and Taiwan, Yeltsin admitted his wrong consideration by assuring Chinese officials. All of the Russia and Taiwan relations will be maintained as the unofficial ties also declared Russian support toward China policy regarding Taiwan and refused to sell weapons to Taiwan (Wilson, 2009: 296).

On the other hand, President Putin took a different approach from Yeltsin. Psychologically, Putin was more interested in China than Taiwan, and it is proven by the agreement signed between China and Russia. The agreement was called the Treaty of Good-Neighborly Friendship and Cooperation between the People's

Republic of China and the Russian Federation (Wilson, 2009: 297). This agreement mainly focused on maintaining territorial integration between two countries and upholding national unity. Before this agreement, a joint declaration between Russia and China became the agreement's inspiration. This joint declaration merely focused on China and Russia's economic cooperation, signed at the U.N. General Assembly in 1996 ([www.un.org](http://www.un.org), 1996). In the case of the China-Taiwan issue, Putin was more supportive of China and disregard Taiwan's interests. Putin's approach could be justified by many reasons, especially after the rise of the Chinese economy. Putin has been aware that to achieve China's substantial commitment regarding diplomatic ties, Russia could not become a hypocrite in the Taiwanese issue. Regardless of the interest toward Taiwan, Russia must maintain unofficial ties and never implemented such a controversial policy regarding Taiwan.

In a strategic view, maintaining ties with Taiwan will harm Russia's geopolitical interest in Northeast Asia. More importantly, after the growing tension of South China Sea disputes. Russia, in this case, could not entrust its geopolitical interest toward Taiwan because of the lack of diplomatic bargain and minimum influence of military from Taiwan (Tubilewicz, 2002: 296). Compared to China, it will be very harmful to Russia if it still insists on maintaining close ties with Taiwan. Even though, in the economic approach, it has more value to sustain relations with Taiwan through the promises of the expansion of the Russian product market and high revenue from the Taiwan trades and loans in the multiple Russian commodities (Tubilewicz, 2002: 286-287). Taiwan undeniably is also part of the most advanced economy in Asia, and Russia still needs economic relations with Taiwan regardless of the conflict between China and Taiwan. The traditional issue of security in the South China Sea and the Far East region of Russia is the issue that is tackling Taiwan's critical side for Russian Foreign Policy.

Russia's most traditional security is the domination of NATO and the Western countries in the Pacific (Mankoff, 2009: 152). As the former 'superpower' country, Russia still has the interest to regain its capability of 'superpower' alongside China. Relation with Taiwan could contribute much to the military interest of Russia. In contrast, by supporting China, Russia could gain security within its territory, especially in the Far East and the Pacific Ocean. In the political view, Russia could gain more legitimacy by making China an ally rather than Taiwan. With the disputes that Russia and China currently face, mutual support could become the source of legitimacy because both countries are the member of the U.N. Security Council (Gabuev, 2015: 7). In this context, Taiwan also could not contribute to making Russia

more supportive of Taiwan. Politically, Taiwan does not have any strategic and political value for Russian interest in Northeast Asia.

### **Russia Foreign Policy and The Emergence Of China**

President Putin has been facing sophisticated diplomacy regarding Russia's relation between China and Taiwan. Putin considered that China has more capabilities compared to Taiwan (Wilson, 2009: 306). Economically, China has been growing massively since the beginning of the 1980s. The current development of China could be identified as the most progressive economic growth in Asia. China has turned to become a significant player and developed country. Taiwan also a country that has a stable and advanced economy also in Asia. Unfortunately, with more population and territory, China could easily surpass Taiwan's economy. Putin also considers that China could become the new economic power' in Asia alongside India (Ivanov, 2002: 123). Taiwan, in contrast, is still focusing on the dispute with China and blockade from China that restrict Taiwan's relations with other countries. Therefore, Taiwan could not have formal and diplomatic relations with any country, especially a country with a significant role in international politics. The only thing that makes Russia preserve unofficial ties with Taiwan is economic interest and trade relations between Russia and Taiwan (Tubilewicz, 295). Even though this is an informal relation, China maintains intense surveillance relation between Russia and Taiwan.

President Putin highly likely will support China because strategically, China is very valuable (BBC, 2000). In the context of Russian interest, China is the country that shared a direct border with Russia, and the emergence of the Chinese military with the ongoing disputes could become the tools for Russia to contend the domination of NATO. However, Taiwan maintains close ties with the U.S., which could become a problem for President Putin. President Putin could be considerate that Taiwan is maintaining hypocrisy toward its diplomacy. Psychologically, President Putin considers that Taiwan is not loyal enough to the Russian interest, and anytime Taiwan could backstab Russian interest in Northeast Asia (Lo, 2015: 144). With Taiwan's hypocrisy toward Western domination in Northeast Asia, Russia could not take a more severe step with Taiwan. Russia could not entrust its national interest toward the uncertain, diplomatic gesture of Taiwan. In this sense, China's domination in East Asia is highly likely regarded by Russia rather than the relative insignificance of Taiwan's foreign policy. Russia could be more entrusted with its steady and stable relation with China because it offers a more significant

booster toward Russia's foreign policy in the region. However, relation with Taiwan is mainly on the trade relation without securing any significant bilateral agreement. Conversely, China is one of the key players in Asia. In the sense of security, consideration will be more helpful if Russia maintains close relations with China and become its strongest ally and arms dealer.

In this context, China has already faced the same problem with Russia, in which Western countries embargoed China in many aspects, such as military and economic. Partnership with Russia could become a valuable alternative for China to overcome the Western embargoes, and Russia also could overcome the failure of Eurasian integration (Trenin, 2001: 280-281). This strategic view is the most substantial reason Russia and China propose a more formal and permanent relation with Russia. Furthermore, with the ongoing disputes that involved China, the support from Russia is absolute. In order to gain legitimacy and bandwagon Western country's influences, China needs support from Russia (Dueben, 2013: 70-71). It is clear that Russia and China are considering collaboration on international politics and in the U.N. too. China and Russia have a longstanding relation in the military aspect, whether arms trade or security cooperation. China and Russia have mutual interests toward their territory and face the same traditional security issue: NATO and the Western alliance in East and Northeast Asia (Oliker et al., 2009: 78). With the military relation with China, Russia gains two ultimate advantages: a powerful alliance and high revenue from the arms trade. However, Taiwan could not give what became Russia's interest (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2014: 142). Therefore, it could be justified that shy Russia put more effort into preserving relations with China than with Taiwan.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is undeniable that Russia has to maintain a close relationship with China. It also could be understood that relation between Russia and China has never been smooth all the time. China and Russia face many bilateral problems that disturb relations between the two countries. In Taiwan's context, Russia had tried to initiate close relations with Taiwan during the Yeltsin era, but it was not successful. Even worse, it made relations with China deteriorated. Russia, in this matter, maintains a neutral attitude and avoids hostility toward the two countries. It could be apprehended through the interest of Russia to maintain its sphere of influence in East Asia. East Asia's current dynamics, especially on the China-Taiwan issue, have become the primary stage for superpower states to strengthen their role. Major



player states involved in this issue are the U.S. and Russia. Russia has to take advantage of the East Asia region's leadership because of deteriorating influence after the cold war. Russia must increase its leadership in the region in order to preserve the balance of power in the region. Without Russia's presence, the current dynamics will be dominated by the U.S. and contended by China's rising superpower. In this sense, if Russia does not want to lose its sphere of influence and fall behind the Chinese sphere of influence, Russia must increase its presence toward changing its foreign policy to be more viable on both sides.

As a newly emerged superpower, Russia could not implement hostility because of the unconstructive impact on its image. On the other hand, Russia could not avoid the fact that China reserves some respect as the 'older comrade.' The issue of China-Taiwan relations was also deliberately allowed by Russia because the dynamics could booster the sphere of Russian foreign policy towards the Northeast Asian region because of Russia's role as one of the respected countries in the region. Russia's role is more required as the pendulum of the balance of power, or at least as 'older comrades of China. The new leadership under President Putin has a steady approach regarding relations with China and Taiwan. Russian foreign policy under President Putin was more in favor of China rather than in Taiwan. It could be understood because China's domination of the Asian economy is becoming stronger day by day.

China slowly evolves to become a major player and a new emerging superpower in Asia. The regional cooperation initiated by China has also become more popular today, almost all Asian countries flattered by the Chinese economy's current development. Contrariwise, relations with Taiwan merely just unofficial trade relation. Russia also fully supported the 'One China Policy' due to the signed agreement between two countries called the Treaty of Good-Neighborly Friendship and Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. The transformation of ideological aspect of Russia contributed significant impact toward their foreign policy changing. Under the Yeltsin era, Russia tends to become a more progressive country. On the contrary, during the Putin era, Russia transforms to be the more opportunistic country who want to increase its role on the region. It can be concluded that under President Putin, Russia could not afford uncertainty relation with Taiwan and prefer China as the partner in an exchange with the accomplishment of Russian interest in Northeast Asia, also expect to be more involved in the dynamics of China-Taiwan relation.

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