



Strategic Insights: The Ukraine Crises and the Emerging Sino-Russian Political Alliance

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The first half of 2014 witnessed a notable enhancement of Russian-Chinese relations. Signs of this visible geostrategic shift include high-profile summit meetings, breakthroughs in energy/gas deals, renewed interest in military-technology cooperation,¹ more integrated military exercises, and closer diplomatic coordination on regional issues (Syria, Iran, Korea, etc.) and multilateral forums (Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia [CICA];² Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa [BRICS];³ G20; United Nations [UN]; etc.). In early May, a Chinese government think tank went as far as to propose to form a “political alliance” (政治联盟) with Russia as was sought by Russian President Vladimir Putin.⁴

Reactions to these developments are mixed, ranging from dismissive⁵ to alarmist.⁶ They nonetheless have only captured part of the picture. It is argued here that much of the recent Sino-Russian posturing is largely, if not exclusively, driven by some short- and medium-term external “stimuli” such as the Ukraine crisis, the U.S.-Asia rebalancing, and/or Japan’s accelerating departure from pacifism, real or perceived. A close look at the three summit meetings between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Putin in 2014 indicates a complex and nuanced reciprocity between the two Eurasian giants. For Moscow and Beijing, a conventional military alliance is not only unnecessary but also unwise, at least for the time being.

Xi’s Sochi Trip: Not Just for Sports.

Regular and frequent high-level visits by Russian and Chinese top leaders have become very much institutionalized over the past decade.⁷ In spite of this track record, it was not clear for most of January whether or not Xi would go to Sochi (the Games were held February 7-23, 2014). Prior to this, top Chinese leaders have never participated in any international sports event in the diplomatic history of the People's Republic of China's (PRC). In mid-January, the Ukraine crisis was reaching the point of no return because both demonstrations and crackdowns were turning more violent. Meanwhile, leaders of almost all major Western countries skipped Sochi in protest of Russia's human rights record, the Edward Snowden affair, Syria, and so on. Additionally, the Western media was seriously questioning Sochi's security.⁸ Consequently, Russia's billion dollar investment in the Sochi games looked grim.

Speaking on January 17 to a press conference, Putin said that, "I have many friends in China. It is not surprising, because we have special relations with China. And I have special feelings for China. China is a great country with a great culture, with very interesting, hard-working and talented people."⁹ Beijing's *Global Times*, an affiliate of China's official *People's Daily*, carried a brief and low-key report of this interview only 3 days later¹⁰ when China's Foreign Ministry announced Xi's decision to join the opening ceremony of the Sochi Winter Olympics.¹¹ Regardless, Xi was the first world leader to meet Putin out of the 40-some foreign leaders coming to the opening ceremonies of the winter Olympics in Sochi. Their meeting covered a wide range of issues including Ukraine, Korea, Syria, economics, military sales, and the World War II commemoration ceremony to be held in 2015. The two sides "reached [a] new important consensus while planning and making arrangements for China-Russia relations," according to the Chinese Ministry of Affairs.¹²

The Chinese media described Xi's decision to join the Sochi opening ceremony as "the first major and correct foreign policy decision for 2014" (重大且正确的外交决策) for both Sino-Russian relations and Eurasian geopolitics. It was the second consecutive year for Xi Jinping to start his first visit abroad for the year by going to Russia.¹³ A less noticeable but perhaps crucial factor for Xi's Sochi trip was the Japan factor. Several days before the Chinese Foreign Ministry announcement, Chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga disclosed that plans were being made for Prime Minister Abe's trip to Sochi to attend the opening ceremony.¹⁴ Japan sent out this "Sochi trial balloon" at a time when Moscow intended to improve relations with Tokyo as part of its own Asia-Pacific "pivot." A more "balanced posture" in Asia

would serve multiple purposes for Russia: to connect Russia with the most dynamic economies of the world; to bring badly needed economic inputs to the far eastern portion of Russia; and to correct its China-heavy and Japan-light posture, among others. Xi's Sochi decision would make sure that Russia's Asia-Pacific "pivot" would not tilt the balance in Japan's favor.

Beyond this, China was facing a Japan determined to depart from its pacifist path. By this time, the two East Asian giants were waging a diplomatic war of words over the interpretation of 20th century history. More than 40 Chinese ambassadors publically denounced Japan's version of the Rape of Nanjing, the comfort women system, Yasukuni Shrine visits, and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute. China's concerns about an unrepentant Japan, real or perceived, are rooted deeply in recent history due to the 35 million Chinese who died during the 14 years of war and occupation by Japan (1931-45). It should also be noted that the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance had only one specifically defined objective, to prevent "the revival of Japanese imperialism."¹⁵

The Xi-Putin Sochi summit did not lead to the signing of any documents or to any joint communique. The two heads of state did, however, jointly hold video talks on February 6 with the captains of the Chinese and Russian naval vessels escorting the shipping of Syrian chemical weapons. This military "appendix" to the Xi-Putin Sochi meeting was highly symbolic for Sino-Russian solidarity in managing international crises.¹⁶ When Xi and Putin met again a few months later in Shanghai, this type of "summit exercise" would become more substantive.

To Shanghai, with Russian Gas.

A flotilla of six vessels from Russia's Pacific fleet steamed into Shanghai harbor on May 18. Two days later, May 20, the week-long "Maritime Cooperation-2014" was launched on the same day as the CICA's 4th summit in Shanghai. It was perhaps the most interoperative and realistic naval exercise in the history of joint Russian-Chinese exercises, because the the two navies conducted a series of drills in anchor defense, anti-submarine, air defense, joint escort, and search and rescue.¹⁷ Putin and Xi presided over the opening of the joint naval exercises in the midst of the CICA conference.¹⁸ The two navies had never jointly drilled in this part of the East China Sea and Chinese naval expert Li Jie was quoted as saying that the choice of drilling areas enabled the Russian navy to familiarize itself with the environment, currents, and weather "in order to meet future needs."¹⁹

Maritime Cooperation-2014 and the 4th CICA summit were planned long before the Ukraine crisis. However, the deepening severity of the Ukraine crisis and tensions in the East and South China Seas were frequently highlighted by the Russian and Chinese media as being reasons for closer coordination between the two nations. In his keynote speech to CICA, Xi advocated “common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security” as a new security vision for Asia. “After all, security in Asia should be maintained by Asians themselves,” Xi told the summit meeting.²⁰ It was unclear how Xi’s emphasis on Asian identity appealed to Putin, whose vast Eurasian landmass, despite its huge Asian part, anchors itself in the West (Europe) and in Christianity (Orthodox).

Russia’s affiliation with CICA, however, was much longer and closer than that of China.²¹ On his part, Putin talked about the need for an “indivisible,” or collective, security system of “genuine and equal” security that “that excludes any closed or restricted systems and blocs.” Given the diversity of the CICA, a “shortcut” for a pan-Asian security system is to synchronize it with those existing security groups in which Moscow plays a larger role, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).²² In Shanghai, the CICA and SCO secretariats signed a memorandum of mutual understanding, and Putin revealed that CICA would do the same thing in the near future with the CSTO, a Russia-dominated security alliance in the post-Soviet sphere.²³

Putin’s real purpose for visiting China was to double-down on the trip by making it a state visit prior to the CICA meeting. In this first foreign visit since the Ukraine crisis,²⁴ Putin focused on economics. The Russian’s revealed that as many as 43 documents were being prepared for Putin’s state visit to China²⁵ and “98 percent” of the 30-year gas deal was finished before the summit.²⁷ The Ukraine crisis seemed to be providing strong impetus, particularly for Russia,²⁶ to compromise on the pricing gap that had kept the two sides from closing the deal for more than 10 years.²⁸ The \$400 billion contract signed in Shanghai will supply China, beginning in 2018, with 38 billion cubic meters per year (bcm/y) for 30-years.²⁹ Some speculated that in 10 years Russia may send Asia as much gas as it currently exports to the European market (about 162 bcm/y),³⁰ which is of strategic significance by itself. Beyond the gas deal, Putin indicated that Russia and China were working on “40 priority projects” (优先项目),³¹ including eight “strategic projects” such as “space exploration, space navigation, airplane/helicopter building, and joint border and transport infrastructure.”³²

Many of these projects had been ongoing for some time, however, they seem to have been given more attention in 2014.³³ In their joint communique, Putin and Xi said that the two sides would maintain and deepen their “high-level strategic trust and dialogue” and “create a new cooperative mechanism if necessary.”³⁴ It is not clear if this wording implies an agreement for the much talked about “political alliance” between the two Eurasian powers, especially given the backdrop of the Ukraine crises. Although unlikely, one should not exclude such a possibility.

Laying “BRICS” for a Brave New World of International Finance?

The third Xi-Putin meeting was held on the sideline of the BRICS’ 6th annual summit in Fortaleza, northeast Brazil, on July 15.³⁵ The main purpose of the BRICS annual meeting was to unveil plans to establish its \$50 billion New Development Bank³⁶ and a \$100 Contingency Reserve Arrangement.³⁷

The five BRICS members are the largest economies outside the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. They account for more than 43 percent of the world’s population, 21 percent of the world’s gross domestic product (GDP), and 17 percent of global trade. The most striking indicator of the BRICS’ significance to the world economy is their share of global foreign-exchange reserves (\$4.4 trillion by the end of 2013). Four of the five BRICS countries are among the top 10 largest foreign exchange holders, and China’s share (\$4 trillion) is bigger than the next six largest holdings combined.³⁸ See Figure 1.

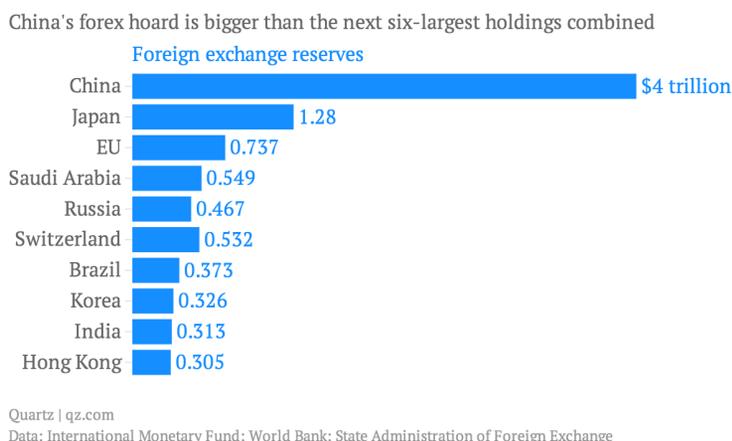


Figure 1. Global Foreign-Exchange Reserves.

Despite such clout, the BRICS countries have been largely marginalized in the

Western-dominated global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. China, for example, has less voting power in the IMF and World Bank than Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg combined.³⁹ Although in 2010, the IMF committed itself to reforming the representation deficit for developing countries within the IMF (increasing it to 6 percent, whereas Washington alone has 17 percent of the voting weight). Some European countries and the U.S. Congress have been, till today, either unwilling or unable, or both, to take any meaningful action to “modernize” these aging, if not outdated, global institutions (70 years since their founding in 1944). The BRICS members therefore “remain disappointed and seriously concerned with the current nonimplementation of the 2010 International Monetary Fund (IMF) reforms, which negatively impacts on the IMF's legitimacy, credibility and effectiveness,” said the Fortaleza Declaration issued immediately after the summit.⁴⁰ From China's perspective, the creation of the BRICS' own bank and reserve pool was “compelled” by the West's indifference and inaction.⁴¹

As a country undergoing Western sanctions because of the Ukraine crisis, Russia's financial sector has been hit hard. In the first quarter of 2014, Russia lost \$51 billion.⁴² Putin therefore had a more urgent need for a non-Western financial institution as an option to the West-dominated international financial system:

In the BRICS case, we see a whole set of coinciding strategic interests. First of all, this is the common intention to reform the international monetary and financial system. In the present form it is unjust to the BRICS countries and to new economies in general. We should take a more active part in the IMF and the World Bank's decision-making system. The international monetary system itself depends a lot on the U.S. dollar, or, to be precise, on the monetary and financial policy of the U.S. authorities. The BRICS countries want to change this.⁴³

One day after Putin's remarks on the BRICS financial institutions, the United States imposed a new round of sanctions against Russia.⁴⁴ The next day, MH17 was downed in east Ukraine, killing all 298 people on board. It looks as though the Ukraine-related crises will only deepen in the coming months, for which China is neither prepared nor welcomes, but nonetheless must deal with.

Price for Beijing's “Neutrality.”

The “alarmist” views regarding Russia and China's “alliance” dismiss Beijing's declared policy of neutrality for the Ukraine crises as disingenuous. They

nonetheless ignore the basic fact that China has had good relations with both Russia and Ukraine, and that China had nothing to do with any of these crises (the ouster of Ukrainian President Yanukovich, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the downing of MH17). Given the still escalating confrontation between Russia and the European Union (EU)/United States, neutrality is perhaps the only rational, or least harmful, choice for Beijing.⁴⁵

Furthermore, there is little that China could do to defuse these crises. In fact, China's interests have been seriously undermined by the rapidly escalating events. By February, what was seen as an opportunity for China in late-2013 (Yanukovich's visit to China and an \$8 billion loan package to Ukraine) was fast evaporating. So were China's extensive interactions in the area of military-technology, a major source of China's military modernization that was not particularly liked by Russia.

Despite China's neutrality, the type of "strategic opportunity" (战略机遇)—meaning that U.S. strategic attention is directed toward places other than China, as expected by some in China in the early phase of the Ukraine crisis—seems remote. Instead of reposturing to Central Europe after Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Barack Obama administration has actually intensified its rebalancing actions around China's peripheries as reflected in Obama's travel to Japan, Korea, and the Philippines in April. Worse still, some critics of U.S.-Ukraine policy went as far as to argue that Russia should be left alone so that the United States would be able to concentrate on a rising China. Consequently, it looks as though China's neutrality for the ongoing Ukraine crisis has actually worsened its security environment.

Politics of "Reluctant Allies."

With the deepening Ukraine crisis, there have been discussions in Russia and China about elevating the current strategic partnership to an alliance. Putin, however, said many times this year that Russia was not pursuing an alliance with China. Other top Russian officials were also wary about the compulsory and intrusive nature of a formal alliance.⁴⁶ In his July visit to China, Russian Presidential Administration Head, Sergei Ivanov, stated several times that Russia and China had no plan to build a military alliance, and that the Russia-China mutual trust has nothing to do with Ukraine.⁴⁷ Prior to the May summit, the Russians indicated that the Ukraine crisis would not be the "key topic" in Putin's meeting with Xi, and it was "irrelevant to the security of Asian countries."⁴⁸ In a more diplomatic manner, the Russian ambassador to China, Andrei Denisov, did not

dismiss the impact of the Ukraine crisis upon relations with China. He nonetheless emphasized the very high level of the bilateral cooperation that requires a better quality of cooperation regardless of the Western sanctions against Russia.⁴⁹

The scholarly community in China has been debating the pros and cons of allying with Russia, and the degree of such an alliance. While some argue that China should not get too close to Moscow lest alarming the West, the consensus is that the current state of strategic partnership with Russia—short of a formal alliance—is just right. Beijing's *Global Times*, for example, commented that the Sino-Russian strategic partnership is constructed not for dealing with the United States and the West, but driven by their respective interests. In fact, better Sino-Russian relations have rarely affected their respective relations with the United States in the recent past. Western pressure, nevertheless, makes such a convergence of interests more valuable and that stronger ties with Moscow would enhance their respective relations with the West. Interestingly, the *Global Times* suggested that healthy and enduring Sino-Russian relations actually need a certain dose of “calm and indifference” (一份坦然和淡定) and that some distance between the two is perhaps more comfortable for both Beijing and Moscow. Within such a construct, China should be ready to protect its own interests by managing the growth of bilateral relations; that Sino-Russian friendship should have space for interstate competition for interests; and that interstate friendship should be nurtured, but not spoiled.⁵⁰

The *Global Times* published this admonition when Xi and Putin were meeting in Shanghai, while their oilmen were bargaining into the early hours of May 21 for the final draft of the gas agreement. The ubiquitous talk in the West of a coming Moscow-Beijing “alliance” is perhaps too simple, if not too naive, for 21st century geopolitik. Welcome to the brave new world of being both “penny” (geoeconomics) and “pound” (geopolitics) wise!

An Addendum: With all of the fanfare such as, “deal of the century”⁵¹ or “the largest construction project in the world in the next 4 years” (Putin's words),⁵² the mighty gas contract signed on May 21 in Shanghai will only increase the share of natural gas in China's energy consumption mix from the current level of less than 6 percent to 8 percent.⁵³ That is, however, still a 30 percent increase—in percentage terms—for China's uphill fight to clean its dirty air.

In the final analysis, a real and close alliance between Moscow and Beijing, similar to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and other U.S.-led alliances, is

neither likely nor necessary in the short and medium terms, unless the core interests of both are perceived to be jeopardized at the same time. For better or worse, the current policies of the Obama administration—punishing Russia and hedging China with a largely militarized Asia pivot—are driving Russia and China into each other’s arms. This is exactly the opposite of what Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger did 4 decades ago. Both administrations tried to manage America’s retrenchment from excessive overseas commitments: Vietnam for Nixon; and, Iraq/Afghanistan/Libya for Obama.

ENDNOTES

1. “Putin Hails Military, Industrial Cooperation With China,” *RIA Novosti*, May 20, 2014; Zhao Yanlong [赵衍龙], “Russian Officials: China Expected to be First Foreign Buyer of S-400 System [俄官员:中国有望成S-400防空系统第一个外国买家],” *Global Times* online [环球网], July 10, 2014, available from world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2014-07/5058561.html.

2. Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) is a multinational forum for enhancing cooperation toward promoting peace, security, and stability in Asia with 25 members including all five Central Asian nations, Afghanistan, and Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Russia, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Vietnam. It was first proposed by Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev on October 5, 1992. China took over the CICA presidency from Turkey for the 2014 to 2016 period, available from www.s-cica.org/page.php?lang=1.

3. The five BRICS countries represent almost 3 billion people with a combined nominal GDP of U.S.\$16.039 trillion and an estimated U.S.\$4 trillion in combined foreign reserves. As of 2014, the BRICS nations represented 18 percent of the world economy. See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BRICS.

4. “China Issued Its First National Security Report, Call for Allying with Russia, Reaching Out to Europe and Stabilizing Relations with US” [中国发布首部国家安全报告 呼吁联俄拉欧稳美], *China Net* [中国网], May 6, 2014, available from mil.huanqiu.com/china/2014-05/4988725.html.

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will-be-a-disaster-for-the-west/.

6. Andrew Small, “Ukraine, Russia, and the China Option: The Geostrategic Risks Facing Western Policy,” Europe Policy Paper, May 2014, Washington, DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, available from www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/mf/1401468298Small_UkraineRussiaChina_May14_web.pdf; Adomanis; Du Shangze, *et al.* [杜尚泽 谢亚宏 青木 纪双城 蓝雅歌 王刚 谢戎彬], “Foreign Media: Sino-Russian Alliance Targeting US [外媒: 中俄建反西方联盟 将矛头对准不爽的美国],” *Global Times* [环球时报], May 22, 2014, available from mil.huanqiu.com/observation/2014-05/5002232.html.

7. In 2013, Putin and Xi met four times: at the BRICS summit in Durban of South Africa; the G20 summit in St. Petersburg of Russia; the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Bishkek of Kyrgyzstan; and, the informal economic leaders’ meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in Bali of Indonesia.

8. Two bomb explosions occurred in Volgograd, Russia, on December 29-30, 2013, killing 34 people. Sochi, which is less than 700 kilometers from Volgograd, is even closer to North Caucasus, Russia’s restless region that includes Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Chechnya. See Howard LaFranchi, “Western Leaders Stay Away from Sochi Olympics. Snub to Russia?” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 7, 2014, available from www.csmonitor.com/World/Olympics/2014/0207/Western-leaders-stay-away-from-Sochi-Olympics.-Snub-to-Russia.

9. Putin’s interview with the BBC, ABC, China’s CCTV, and Russiya-1, Channel One, and Around the Rings. See “Interview to Russian and Foreign Media,” January 19, 2014, available from eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/6545.

10. “Putin: Sochi to Promote Exchanges with World and China as a Great Nation [普京表示索契冬奥增进与世界交流 称赞中国伟大],” *Global Times* [环球时报], January 20, 2014, available from world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2014-01/4769391.html.

11. “Russia, China to ‘Synchronize Watches’; Chinese leader Xi Jinping Will Visit Russia on January 6-8 to Join the Olympics Opening Ceremony,” *Itar-Tass, Open Source Center* (OSC hereafter), January 28, 2014.

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15. "Communique: Signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Alliance and Friendship [中苏两国关于缔结友好同盟互助条约及协定的公告]," Moscow, Russia, February 14, 1950, in *People's Daily* net [人民网], available from news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2004-12/15/content_2336329.htm.

16. "Xi Jinping and Putin Jointly Hold Video Talks with Captains of Chinese and Russian Naval Vessels Participating in Escorting the Shipping of Syrian Chemical Weapons [中俄参与叙化武护航习近平普京与舰长通话]," *Xinhua* Net [新华网], February 7, 2014, available from mil.huanqiu.com/china/2014-02/4809996.html.

17. The two navies dispatched 14 surface vessels, two submarines, nine fixed-wing aircraft, and special units.

18. The last time the Chinese and Russian heads of state observed a military drill was in 2007 when President Hu Jintao traveled to Russia and observed the SCO's "Peace-Mission 2007" anti-terror exercise.

19. It was outside of the Yangtze River's estuary and close to China's most developed part including Shanghai. See "Showing Muscle' in Eastern China Sea, Warn Countries Not to Threaten Region [中俄东海 '亮肌肉' 警示威胁地区和平国家]," *Jinghua Times* [京华时报], May 20, 2014, available from world.huanqiu.com/article/2014-05/4999803.html.

20. Zhang Yu, "Xi Defines New Asian Security Vision at CICA," *Global Times*, May 22, 2014, available from www.globaltimes.cn/content/861573.shtml.

21. CICA was a brainchild of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev in 1992 for collective security in Asia. For decades after the Soviet break, Kazakhstan had been considered one of the few strong advocates among the former Soviet republics for Eurasian integration centered on Russia.

22. The Collective Security Treaty Organization.

23. "Statement by Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation," May 21, 2014, CICA, available from www.s-cica.org/page.php?page_id=718&lang=1.

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27. Russian officials have repeatedly denied the Ukraine factor in the gas deal with China. Deputy Prime Minister Arkadiy Dvorkovich, who led the Russian side at the April 9 gas meeting, denied that China had toughened its negotiating stance in response to Russia's tension with the West, saying "a short-term political situation has no influence over these long-term interests." See "Russia Not to Switch Energy Supplies from West to East Over Ukraine—Official," *RIA Novosti* in Russian, April 9, 2014; OSC.

28. A Kremlin assistant on foreign affairs indicated that Russia's difficult and "complex" relations with the West was "obviously affected the gas negotiation with China to certain degree." See "Russia's Deteriorating Relations West Affecting Gas Talks With China—Aide," *RIA Novosti* in Russian, May 16, 2014; OSC; "China not using Ukraine factor to drive Russian gas price down—CNPC," *Interfax*, May 14, 2014; OSC; "Six Priorities in Putin's DICA Trip and China Visit [普京参加亚信峰会并访华六大看点]," *China Youth Daily* [中国青年报], May 19, 2014, available from news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-05/19/c_126515945_3.htm?prolongation=1.

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35. “Xi Meets S. African and Russian Presidents, Indian PM,” *CNTV*, July 17, 2014, available from english.peopledaily.com.cn/n/2014/0717/c98389-8756902.html.

36. The bank will be headquartered in Shanghai, and its first president will be an Indian. Each of the five BRICS members will contribute \$10 billion to the bank.

37. For the pool, China will contribute \$41 billion; Brazil, India, and Russia \$18 billion each; and, South Africa \$5 billion.

38. See qz.com/226704/problems-even-chinas-4-trillion-cant-solve/.

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