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Ambivalent China-Russia Relations in Eurasia

By HIROSE Yoko

Fifteen republics became independent due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, though they, besides Baltic trios, remained under the influence of Russia. Few of them had the natural resource, and the infrastructure had been built under the single unit of the Soviet, therefore it was not easy for most of them to operate immediately as an independent state. Additionally, many ethnic conflicts occurred in the later years of the Soviet Union, as the issues became clearer nationwide in the course of Perestroika and glasnost, helped accelerate the disorder at the end and post-dissolution of the country. And the fact that the Russia supported some separatists helped the ethnic issue remain perpetually. The separatists defeated their legal "parents states," which they are not supposed to be able to but thanks to the Russian support, resulting the birth of unrecognized states –a state organization without the international recognition as an independent state. What we have to keep in mind when we observe those separatist entities of the former Soviet Union, such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, Transnistria in Moldova, Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine, is that all of their legal parent states have been pro-Western and anti-Russia, except Azerbaijan maintaining the balance in their diplomacy in recent years. In another words, Russia has punished those former Soviet members severely if one attempts to be more independent from Russia by fueling the ethnic and other issues. The obvious examples were Russo-Georgian War in 2008, and yet to be resolved Ukrainian Crisis peaked in 2014. Russia has taken any means and ways to prevent those former members, of which they regard as their sphere of influence, to be independent. Especially President Vladimir Putin has conducted his diplomacy by securing its sphere of influence --the former Soviet members, and Arctic Region in recent years-- as the grand strategy. "The Eurasian Union" initiative that President Putin promotes, to bridge Asia and Europe, is one of the embodiment.

Meanwhile China's rise is becoming apparent. China is expanding its reach worldwide with its robust 'China Money,' but to Eurasia in particular, represented by projects like Silk Road Economic Belt, and Belt and Road Initiative. For Russia, China's Eurasian initiative interferes their sphere of influence due to the overlap on theirs. On the other hand, China, too, regards Eurasia as an important region as their sphere of influence. Therefore, China and Russia are rivals when it comes to their influence over Eurasia. Russia would have shown a clear negativity to China's expansion before. The annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in March, 2014, and the following crisis, however, changed Russia's position decisively. While President Putin gained a strong support domestically, the international community criticized Russia strongly, and the major Western states imposed multiple strict economic sanctions. Many of the states that had been importing oils and

natural gas from Russia, too, lowered their dependency on Russia. On the other hand, Russia took the countermeasure to the sanctions, intensifying the international relations. As a result, Russia ended up isolated.

Under such circumstance, China was a lifesaver for Russia. Russia and China share the same goal originally, to construct multipolar world which challenges unipolar dominance by the U.S., and had built officially a friendly relationship despite actually mutually distrusted. But the Ukrainian Crisis transformed the China-Russia relations decisively. For example, a big trade deal of Russian natural gas export to China was agreed, by Russia offering the compromise on the price and other conditions, which did not happen till then. In many other areas such as economy, military, technological cooperation, joint study on history, the two countries' tie also became closer. So Russia and China partnered in two mega projects. The two also agreed to work closely not only in Eurasia, but also in the Arctic region. Initially they had agreed that Russia will focus on their political and military expansion of the influence, while China do so economic fields, however, China also grew politically and militarily as it's grown economically. The level of the growth is not Russia's favor, but Russia still needs the close relationship with China, therefore they have to ignore it for now given the circumstance.

Meanwhile, many of the former Soviet states welcome the China's expansion. They do so because Georgia and Ukraine are being punished by Russia for their pro-Western policies, and the resource rich Central Asian states had to sell their resources cheaply and exclusively to Russia, that they aim to diversify their economy and lower the dependency to Russia. Some countries, on the other hand, are cautious on the rapid expansion of China. Yet the former Soviets' and Europe's cautiousness towards China seems relatively lower than towards Russia, obviously since the Ukraine Crisis. For example, Arctic countries are rather welcoming China the economic giant to be involved. It is natural that Chinese presence has increased in Eurasia while Russia has been isolated internationally. It is said that there is no doubt for President Putin to be reelected on March 18, 2018 presidential election, the 4th anniversary of the annexation of Crimea, and he would make the full effort for realizing the strong Russia by maintaining the image of the strong leader. China and Russia rivalry in Eurasia will not end, though the infrastructure and the economy of the region will be developed for sure if they cooperate, which is beneficial for the regional countries. It will be a very hopeful turn if rivalry and cooperation of China and Russia lead to the development of the region. Therefore, I believe it is important for Japan and the world to watch the situation, offer support when necessary, to realize such a desirable development.

(This is the English translation of an article written by HIROSE Yoko, Professor, Keio University / Academic Member, Global Forum of Japan, which originally appeared on the e-forum "Giron-Hyakushutsu (Hundred Views in Full Perspective)" of GFJ on March 7, 2018.)