



Minsk Peace Deal: Hope amidst Persisting Complexities

*Dr. Dinoj K Upadhyay**

In quest for establishing peace in Ukraine, leaders of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France held talks on 11 February 2015 in Belarus capital, Minsk. The peace talks in Minsk, which were termed as 'last chance negotiation', were considered to be crucial in facilitating a diplomatic solution of the Ukraine crisis. Although US President Barack Obama supports 'non violent economic sanctions' against Russia, the US Congressional hawks are demanding to provide Ukraine weapons for countering rebels, which, Moscow believes, would lead to 'all-out war'. Considering the severe implications of escalating hostilities in Ukraine, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel and the French President, François Hollande initiated a diplomatic move to prevent the crisis to intensify further. The European political establishment realizes that military means would not be able to bring durable peace in Ukraine and the region. As German Chancellor Merkel categorically stated, "I cannot imagine any situation in which improved equipment for the Ukrainian army leads to President Putin being so impressed that he believes he will lose militarily." Before arriving in Minsk on 11 February 2015, Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande held wider consultations with Russia, Ukraine and the US, and further economic sanctions on Russia were also put on hold by the European Union.

The Minsk negotiations yielded a detailed 13-point agreement: 'A Complex of Measures for Fulfillment of the Minsk Agreement', which calls for immediate ceasefire in eastern Ukraine. The Joint Statement, which was issued by four leaders, reaffirms territorial integrity and diplomatic solution to the crisis. The agreement provides decentralization for rebel regions – Donetsk and Luhansk – by the end of 2015 and withdrawal of heavy weapons. It was also agreed that amnesty for prisoners involved in fighting would be granted; all foreign militias would be withdrawn, all illegal groups would be disarmed and restrictions would be lifted in rebel areas. To ensure effective implementation of the ceasefire, the agreement ensures its monitoring by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Although ceasefire had been violated several times, fighting has been reported even when the ceasefire agreement is in action, and both Kiev and rebels refuse to withdraw heavy weaponry, some positive movements have been noticed lately. The Ukrainian government and rebels have exchanged prisoners; around 139 Ukrainian soldiers and 52 rebels were freed. The rebels also agreed to pullback the heavy weapons. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has confirmed that Ukraine forces and rebels have withdrawn 'significant amount' of heavy weapons.

Amidst growing geo-political rivalries between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as the intellectual discourse on Ukraine crisis points out, it would be reductionist to say that the deal would establish lasting peace in the region; it may bring temporary ceasefire. In their analysis, Der Spiegel Staff rightly put it: "It is a fragile deal full of question marks, one which can only succeed if all parties dedicate themselves to adhering to it. ...The Minsk deal is brief respite... But it is a success nonetheless." A comprehensive and durable peace in the region would depend on how the West and Russian policies towards each other shape in the future. Moscow has explicitly stated that it would strongly oppose the NATO expansion or weapons to Ukraine. Earlier NATO eastward expansions also caused anxiety in Russia. The geographical position of Ukraine is crucial for Russian-EU energy linkages. Thus, Moscow may not like to dilute its political influence over Ukraine. The Russians perceive President Poroshenko as not an 'absolutely independent figure'. Pravda.Ru says, '... He is actually Washington's screen...'

The NATO strategy indicates that it seems to be ready for long term stand-off with Russia. The Deputy Secretary General of NATO, Alexander Vershbow said, "The West must be ready for a long standoff with Russia over Ukraine and not quickly resume normal ties as it did after the 2008 Georgian war. Our strategy has to be one of patience and consistency. Russia expects us to give up the sanctions and go back to business as usual, without changing its own conduct." The European countries seem to be anxious of rising tensions between Russia and the NATO. Escalation of conflicts would have severe political and economic implications. The human cost of Ukraine conflict has already been rising. According to the United Nations, the Ukraine crisis has left more than 5,400 people dead and approximately 12,972 people have been wounded. It is estimated that around 1.2 million Ukrainians have fled their homes and around 5.2 million people are living in conflict areas. The German Chancellor Merkel said, "... The (Ukraine) crisis cannot be resolved by military means. That's why, now, it's more important than ever to lay out concrete steps, which translate the Minsk agreements into reality.... It's unclear whether they'll succeed. Nevertheless, the French President and I agree that it's worth giving it a try." Pro-Russian voices have been appearing in the European political discourse. There is also an opinion that the US' geopolitical design would be at odds with peace in the region and economic sanctions against Moscow are not favourable for Europe. Marine Le Pen, leader of National Front, said, "The aim of the Americans is to start a war in Europe to push NATO to the Russian border." Vladimir Putin paid an official visit to Hungary, which was his first visit to any EU member state since crisis in Ukraine broke out last year.

As a few analysts have remarked that Vladimir Putin's policy amply indicates that he seems to be ready to engage the West in areas of mutual significance, but he will not give strategic concessions to it. The EU is the largest trade partner of Russia. Due to western economic sanctions, plummeting oil prices and falling rouble, prospects for Russia's economy are expected to be weak, which may force President Putin to become less aggressive towards Ukraine. Serena Giusti and Tomislava Penkova note, "The entire history of relations between Russia and Europe has been marked by attraction (sometimes emulation on the part of Moscow) and the need to cooperate, periodically replaced by competition and mistrust." President Putin has also said that war with neighbouring

Ukraine is 'unlikely'; and also recognized Minsk ceasefire deal as the best way to stabilise eastern Ukraine. The agreement is a step forward towards peace, but it remains uncertain how Russia, the EU and the NATO would synergize their policies to dissolve their prevailing mistrust and cooperate for promoting peace in the region.

** Dr. Dinoj K Upadhyay is Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs, Sapru House, New Delhi.*

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.