



Russia and the Minsk II Ceasefire

*Dr. Indrani Talukdar**

The mayhem of the Ukrainian crisis that unfolded in November 2013 is persisting, resulting in resisting resolution to a peaceful solution, thereby making the situation dangerous. The recent attempt in the form of a ceasefire called Minsk II by the major players involved in the crisis, namely Germany, France and Russia along with Ukraine, is on the verge of nullification as the fighting continued between the Kiev government and the pro-Russian separatists. The new ceasefire is a follow up of the previous one that was signed last year in September.

The Ukrainian President Peter Poroshenko accused Russia of 'direct and open aggression' against Ukraine¹ by supporting the pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. He also pointed the finger at Kremlin for their involvement in the killing of the Russian opposition party leader Boris Nemtsov. According to Poroshenko, the slain leader Nemtsov was about to reveal the findings of a report that presented evidence to prove Russia's direct involvement in the separatist rebellion in Ukraine, which Moscow has been denying.²

Russia and the US Fallout

The Ukrainian crisis has already created the danger of the return of the Cold War between the two arch rivals, Russia and the US, dividing the world into three camps—Russia, the US and the neutral ones. The quantification of hostility between Russia and the US has reached a heightened level, leading to the sabotage of crucial bilateral engagements, such as the refusal

of US help on protecting Moscow's stockpiles of weapons-grade uranium and plutonium from being stolen or sold in the black market³ and the US accusation that Russia was violating the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty last year by testing a ground-launched cruise missile.⁴ It has banned the export to Russia of civilian technology with potential military applications; suspended cooperation with Russia on civilian nuclear energy projects; cut off NASA's contacts with its Russian counterpart; and also denied Russian specialists access to the laboratories of the US Department of Energy.⁵

These measures against Russia have hardened its stand against the US. It does not want the Obama administration to be a part of any negotiations regarding the settlement of the Ukrainian crisis. The EU, on behalf of the West including the US, is negotiating for a peaceful solution, but without any breakthrough. Last year, the cease fire, which was agreed upon by the conflicting parties (Kiev government, the rebels supported by Russia and the EU), were violated, leading to heavy casualties among both the fighting sides and severe sanctions on Russia.

Challenges Leading to the Minsk II

The dragging of the conflict, whose repercussions have affected the economy of Europe along with Ukraine and Russia, had led to an 'all-night' negotiation between the Kiev government, Russia, Germany and France to find a solution to the crisis. The Minsk II ceasefire, which went into effect from February 15, 2015, is based on last year September Minsk I peace agreement, which had failed.⁶ The points that were agreed between the parties in the ceasefire were:

- Immediate and full bilateral ceasefire;
- Withdrawal of all heavy weapons by both sides;
- Effective monitoring and verification regime for the ceasefire and withdrawal of heavy weapons, which will be monitored by OSCE;
- From day one of the withdrawal, begin a dialogue on the holding of local elections in the self-proclaimed independent regions in Donetsk and Luhansk;
- Pardon and amnesty by banning any prosecution of figures involved in the Donetsk and Luhansk conflict;
- Release of all hostages and other illegally detained people;

- Unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid to the needy, internationally supervised;
- Restoration of full social and economic links with affected areas in eastern Ukraine; Ukraine will restore its banking services in districts affected by the conflict.
- Full Ukrainian government control will be restored over the state border, throughout the conflict zone. To begin on the first day after local elections and be completed after a comprehensive political settlement, by the end of 2015. (Local elections in rebel-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk regions will be based on Ukrainian law and a constitutional reform).
- Withdrawal of all foreign armed groups, weapons and mercenaries from Ukrainian territory to be monitored by the OSCE. All illegal groups to be disarmed.
- Constitutional reform in Ukraine, with the adoption of a new constitution by the end of 2015. A key element will be decentralisation (taking account of the special features of certain parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, agreed with representatives of those regions), and adoption of permanent laws on the special status of those areas.⁷

The new ceasefire was supposed to lay out a roadmap for a lasting settlement in eastern Ukraine, including an amnesty for the separatists and devolution of power from Kiev to the war-torn eastern regions.

Challenges despite the Ceasefire

Within its implementation, Ukraine witnessed the first casualties, which were from the rebel's side, leading to fierce fight that violated the terms of the ceasefire. One of the demands of the separatists is a guarantee from the Kiev government and the West that Ukraine would not become a member of NATO.⁸ This demand of the rebels reflects the sentiments of Russia, which has been apprehensive about a move like this.

The battleground between the Kiev troops and the rebels had extended to Debaltseve, a railway hub that links Donetsk and Luhansk and Maripoul,⁹ a strategic port city for both Ukraine and Russia. Before the ceasefire, there was fighting going in Debaltseve, which is seen as vital for the separatists to make their enclaves sustainable.¹⁰ The separatists had refused to observe ceasefire in this area.¹¹ The argument put forward by them was that Debaltseve did not come under the ceasefire clause. The city was taken over by the rebels after days of heavy fighting.¹² After Debaltseve, the fighting has moved to Maripoul and the Ukrainian authorities

fear about the capture of the port city by the separatists in a bid to establish a corridor between mainland Russia and Crimea.¹³ Maripoul is vital for eastern Ukraine's steel and grain exports and straddles the coastal route from the Russian border to Crimea.¹⁴ Taking the port city would create a more delineated enclave, and if the separatists are successful in consolidating these areas into an autonomous state in the future, then access to the port city would create economic benefits,¹⁵ in turn, valuable for Russia.

The Kiev government, along with the West and the US, has blamed Russia for assisting the rebels with arms and troops and also of directing 'foreign sniper groups'¹⁶ in Ukraine. Moscow maintains that the troops that are fighting alongside the rebels are the Russian volunteers and have not been instructed by the Kremlin government. On the military equipments, the Kremlin maintains that the weaponry systems are acquired from the old Soviet bases and seized from the Ukrainian soldiers after their retreat¹⁷ from the battlefields. Markian Lubkivsky, the adviser to the head of the SBU (the Ukrainian version of the CIA) on November 2014 had stated that the Russian troops were not involved in the war and were also not present in Ukraine.¹⁸

Russia's Justification, Insecurities and Negotiations

Russian President Vladimir Putin has admitted that that he ordered officials on taking control of Crimea weeks before the March 2014 referendum, which prompted the region's annexation from Ukraine. This account is contrary to the previous assertions from Russian officials that the annexation decision was taken only after the referendum when Crimeans voted to become part of the Russian Federation.¹⁹ According to Putin, the reason behind the action was to protect the ethnic Russians in the peninsula and also about rectifying an injustice wherein the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had transferred Crimea from Russia to Ukraine, then a Soviet republic, as a gift in 1954.²⁰ He defended Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region in March, saying that Russia would never give up the 'sacred' peninsula.²¹ The disclosure of Putin leaves the Ukrainian crisis in a conundrum as high stakes of Ukraine and Russia's national interests are involved. With the involvement of the West in the intra-state conflict, tension is heightened between Russia and them. The extent of success in achieving the desired result of peace restoration in Ukraine is questionable.

Russia believes that the ex-Soviet republics are under its sphere of influence²² and any kind of foreign intervention into the domestic matters is unacceptable.²³ The Kremlin feels that the West, especially the US, wants to encircle and contain Russia's power through these countries. It accuses the US of instigating colour revolutions in Moscow's neighbouring countries and also supporting the opposition parties within the country for regime change. In December 2014, Putin, in his annual State of the Union Address accused the West of provoking a crisis in Ukraine and using sanctions to try to constrain Russia. He accused the US and Europe of cynically using the Ukraine crisis as an excuse to pursue a long-held strategy aimed at weakening Russia. He said that "the policy of containment... has been carried out against... for many years... whenever someone thinks that Russia has become too strong or independent, these tools are quickly put into use."²⁴ However, with severe sanctions imposed on Russia and staggering oil prices, the forecast of the country's economy has not been encouraging since some time. Putin has slashed his own salary and that of his ministers by 10 per cent as the country continues to face economic hardships.²⁵

Russia, which has been the most affected²⁶ out of the outside players involved in the crisis, had circulated a draft resolution endorsing the new ceasefire agreement and calling on all parties to carry it out fully.²⁷ The move had surprised the West given the 'assumed' role of Moscow in the Ukrainian crisis.

The resolution was submitted to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) by Russia on February 13, a day after the Minsk deal was agreed on. The draft is aimed at endorsing and executing the Minsk agreement. It expresses concern over the continuing violence in eastern Ukraine, and stresses the importance of resolving the conflict peacefully. The resolution calls for a 'total ceasefire' and a 'political solution' that respects the 'sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine'. The Russian spokesperson at the UNSC urged the Ukrainian side to enter into dialogue with representatives of self proclaimed independent states of Donetsk and Luhansk – instead of blaming Moscow for interfering in the conflict.²⁸

The ceasefire has been maintained in the two regions, Donetsk and Luhansk, which were mentioned in the document. There is withdrawal of heavy weapons from the contesting

borders and both the warring sides have exchanged dozens of prisoners as per the ceasefire clause. According to Poroshenko, the pro-Russian rebels have withdrawn 'significant' amount of heavy weapons²⁹ as per the ceasefire clause.

Reasons that Might Lead to Stalemate

However, with the latest imposition of sanctions on the separatists by the US and sending \$75 million in new 'non-lethal defensive security assistance' to the Ukrainian government³⁰ did not lead to the resolution of the situation. Last month, the UK had decided to send military personnel to Ukraine to train the Ukrainian army.³¹

These moves by the US and UK would aggravate the situation as Russia has been feeling threatened by the West's intervention in its 'near abroad' sphere through NATO's expansion and the EU's trade agreements with ex-Soviet countries. In a report released by some former top US officials, it is said that Russia's *so-called*³² victory in Ukraine might tempt Putin to use his doctrine of protecting ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in seeking territorial changes elsewhere in the neighbourhood, including in the Baltic States, provoking a direct challenge to NATO.³³ Meanwhile, the NATO is planning for the biggest military exercise in the Baltic States in October and November,³⁴ which might aggravate insecurity within Russia, leading to provocation and stalemate in the conflict.

Conclusion

The Ukrainian crisis has revealed the distrust prevailing between Russia and the West, especially the US post Cold War. Russia feels insecure with the West's expansion in its neighbourhood as Moscow sees it as a direct threat to its influence and national interests. It wants the global order to be multi-polar, where it will be treated as an equal partner by the West, which has not been the case. To mitigate the Ukrainian crisis from becoming an apocalyptic event (as President Putin had remarked recently), immediate confidence building measures, eventually leading to trust and respect needs to be implemented between Russia and the West. All the parties involved (Kiev government, the separatists, Russia and the West) need to stop the blame game and work together for the successful implementation of the ceasefire.

* *Dr. Indrani Talukdar is a Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*
Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.

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