



Ukraine: The Clash of the Titans

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The political turmoil in Ukraine seems to have developed into a crisis of identity for not just the Ukrainians but also for the Russians, the European Union and the US. The crisis is no longer an inter-state clash but a Russia versus West confrontation. The mayhem unfolded in November 2013 when President Viktor Yanukovich decided to pull out of negotiations to establish closer trade ties with the EU instead of seeking better ties with Russia. This resulted to massive protests in Kiev, the largest protests ever seen since the Orange revolution of 2004.

The wide spread protests led to political and economic breakdown in Ukraine with the government taking strict action against the protesters. Russia in an attempt to quell the protests signed an agreement with the Ukraine government to buy back Ukrainian bonds worth US\$ 15 billion and reduce the price of the gas supplied by Russia. This deal with Moscow did not stem the tide of protests against the government, with the protestors supporting better relations with the EU and the US, leading to a crackdown on the protesting public, resulted in a number of deaths.

In the ensuing political trouble, both EU and Russia sent envoys to broker a political settlement to ease tensions between the government and the opposition parties. However, the agreement became redundant soon after it was signed and on February 22, 2014, it was reported that President Yanukovich had left the capital city of Keiv for the Russian dominated North East of the

country (Kharkiv in north east Ukraine) from where he went off to Russia. He had to leave Ukraine after the mainstream opposition with the help of the right wing party, Right Sector, seized the offices forcefully in Kiev. President Yanukovich accused the Right Sector for the ‘coup d’état’ and denounced it by stating that he was still the legitimately elected head of the state. In the UN, the ‘interim government’ claimed that as many as 16,000 Russian troops had been deployed in the Crimea region¹ and asked for international help. Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin, during an emergency UNSC meeting on March 4, 2014, said that ousted Ukrainian President Yanukovich sent a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 1, 2014 asking him to deploy military to restore law and order in Ukraine.²

The Ukrainian situation has divided the international community in its response to the crisis; it has also brought forward the division within Ukraine between the north-east of the country closer to Russia (ethnically and common Russian language) and the south-west that is pro-west. The call by the Crimean parliament to hold a referendum on the question of autonomy or ‘join Russia’ brought this division to the forefront. The situation in Ukraine alarmed the international community which called for restraint by all the involved parties and sought peaceful solution based on dialogue. The crisis brought the differences between US and Russia to the forefront and the two supported the opposite sides. Significantly, both countries represent two different narratives of the crisis.

US Reaction and Interests in the Crisis

President Barack Obama has been critical of the violence that had engulfed Ukraine. The US called upon all parties to negotiate the peaceful resolution of the crisis and stated that the referendum was illegal. Reacting to the secession vote in Crimea and Russia, President Obama in a statement said that, “it was a clear violation of Ukrainian constitution and international law and it is not recognised by the international community.” He further expanded the scope of the sanctions by including “Russian officials -- entities operating in the arms sector in Russia and individuals who provide material support to senior officials of the Russian government.” The US has made it clear that if Russia continues to interfere in Ukraine, the US would impose additional sanctions. The President through his statement has made it clear that the US is willing to calibrate its response on whether Russia chooses to escalate or de-escalate the situation. While it hopes for diplomatic solution to the crisis, the US stands firm in its unwavering support to Ukraine.³

In 1994, the US had agreed to guarantee security to Ukraine as a part of the agreement under which Ukraine voluntarily gave up its nuclear assets to US. Hence, the current Kiev government expects the US to come forward and fulfil its obligations.

For the US, the stability of the EU is a part of its security architecture. For the EU, a stable Ukraine, with whom it shares its second largest border, is imperative for its security strategy. In such a situation the US is supportive of its partners and allies within the EU to build closer ties with Ukraine. The crisis also presents a case for the US to try and marginally reduce Russia's sphere of influence in the region. In response to the crisis the US imposed visa restrictions. President Obama signed an executive order that authorizes sanctions on those responsible for violating what the president says are 'the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine'. The US has also taken steps to freeze the assets of individuals and organisation as part of its sanctions against Russia and Ukraine. The President also called on the US Congress to deliver an aid package including a US\$ 1 billion loan guarantee that would help smoothen the path for reforms in Ukraine and give the Prime Minister and his government the capacity 'to do what they need to do' including organizing elections.⁴ To exert pressure on Russia, the US and the EU may also boycott the G-8 summit which will be held in Sochi in June 2014. In a show of support, the US is also conducting joint military exercises in the region with allies like Bulgaria, Romania and Poland. However, a chance of any military escalation between two nuclear powers over Ukraine is not quite probable.

The Republicans and a certain section of the Democrats have been critical of President Barak Obama's restrained reaction on the Ukrainian crisis. Domestically, the US President has supported the course of actions taken by the US in terms of diplomatic measures such as travel restrictions and freezing assets of individuals and organisations undermining democracy. There is no support for the US troop involvement as post-Afghanistan and Iraq, the US is suffering from military fatigue.

Russia's Reaction and Interest in the Crisis

Russia has been accused of 'armed invasion'⁵ in the Ukrainian crisis after its increased military presence in the Crimean peninsula. It has firmly denied the accusation and maintains that it was only after President Yanukovich's 'asking' Russia send troops to restore law and order, and protect

the ethnic Russian population.⁶ The Russian troops entered Crimea after President Yanukovich had to leave on February 23, 2014 to Russia after the mainstream opposition seized the offices in Kiev on February 22. He denounced the events as a ‘coup d’état’ and Russia supported him by condemning the events. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on February 22 said that the events in Kiev were ‘a direct threat to the sovereignty and constitutional order in Ukraine’ and told the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry that Kiev had been taken over by ‘illegal extremists groups.’⁷ Russia’s involvement has been unacceptable to the US and the West and has become one of the causes for the failure of any diplomatic negotiations.

Since the interim government in Kiev has come to power, Russia has withheld the distribution of US\$ 15 billion aid to Ukraine.⁸ It maintains that the interim government in Kiev is unacceptable⁹ and opposes US and EU financial support to the new government by terming it as illegal. Moscow has pointed out that the US laws oppose financial support to any regime that uses force to take power¹⁰ and in Ukraine, the opposition parties under the right wing party, Right Sector ousted President Yanukovich through armed force.

Under these circumstances, Crimea on March 16 voted to secede from Ukraine and joined Russia on March 18. Ninety seven per cent of the Crimean voters have supported for joining Russia¹¹. In reaction to this vote, the US and the EU have imposed sanctions on 11 Russians and 21 Ukrainians assets and also banned travel.¹² Defying Ukrainian protests and Western sanctions, President Putin after signing the treaty on March 18 to make Crimea a part of Russia again, said that he did not plan to seize any other region of Ukraine. Putin described the move as ‘correcting past injustice’ and responding to what he called ‘Western encroachment upon Russia’s vital interests’.¹³ Russia’s move to take over Crimea was defended by the former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev who said that the March 16, 2014 referendum ‘corrected a historical mistake’.¹⁴

Western leaders have denounced Russia's actions in Crimea as a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and a breach of international law,¹⁵ and have declared non-recognition of Crimea. Russia has been threatened with further sanctions and also disqualified from G8.¹⁶ Reacting to this, Putin during a joint session of parliament in the Kremlin on March 18 criticized the Western nation’s reactions and called it as ‘hypocrisy’, saying they had endorsed Kosovo's right to self-

determination and independence from Serbia but now denied Crimean the same rights.¹⁷ Russia has been trying to handle the situation both diplomatically and militarily. The crisis has moved beyond intra-state circle to Russia and US/EU clash of interest. Russia's moves showcase its staunch desire to protect its national interest in Ukraine, even militarily.

During the time of the crisis, Russia held two military exercises in the regions of Rostov, Belgorod and Kursk, which are close to the border of Ukraine, first on February 28-March 3 and the second from March 13, which will continue till the end of March. After pro-Moscow gunmen seized government offices in the Crimea region and raised a Russian flag on February 27,¹⁸ the Russians started their first exercise from February 28. The reasons for the exercises given by Russia are that the exercises in February were to check combat readiness of armed forces in western and central military districts as well as several branches of the armed forces.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the March 13 exercise held along the borders of Crimea was to tighten Russia's grip in the area,²⁰ as it is a strategic location for Moscow's national interest such as for energy transit, the warm water port in Sevastopol and to restore Russian influence over its former Soviet Union territory. These exercises by Russia ruffled Kiev and the US/EU.

On March 12, NATO deployed two surveillance aircraft to monitor Ukraine's air space and Black Sea ship movements from Poland and Romania as Russia consolidated its military build-up in Crimea.²¹ With tensions rising in Ukraine, Poland was considering to deploy the US led anti-missile defense system. The Polish leaders welcomed US Vice President Joe Biden along with the executives from MEADS International, the consortium developing the Medium Extended Air Defense System on March 18 in Warsaw. Biden also reaffirmed the US commitment to place an operational ballistic missile defense site in Poland by 2018 - one intended more for long-range threats from places like Iran, rather than Russia. It was discussed during the meeting that MEADS could counter any medium-range missile threats from Russia.²² Russia has made its concerns clear at the possibility of the US-led NATO military alliance expanding into Ukraine. President Putin declared on March 18 that he does not want to be welcomed in Sevastopol (Crimean home of Russia's Black Sea fleet) by NATO sailors.²³ While, President Obama on March 19 ruled out US military involvement in Ukraine;²⁴ however, Europe's request to the US to reaffirm its commitment to European security as was said by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen in an

interview on March 18²⁵ indicates the seriousness of the Ukrainian crisis.

Russia has been alarmed by NATO's expansion in the Eastern Europe and with the non-dismantlement of the US' anti-ballistic missile shield in Poland and Czech Republic. The US anti-missile defense system in Europe, which NATO and the US maintain is aimed at countering threats from North Korea and Iran, has been a particular source of friction in US-Russian relations. This system is seen by Russia as a threat to its security. In March 2013, the US announced that it was modifying its planned missile defense deployment to Poland, dropping plans to station SM-3 Block II interceptors in the country by 2022.²⁶ However, the insecurity within Russia remains high as the missile shield was not dismantled despite the breakthrough in the Iranian nuclear imbroglio in November 2013, which Moscow asked the US to abandon the system as there was no threat to the US and West from Iran. With NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen remarking on March 19 that Russia's aggression in Ukraine is a 'wake-up call' for the Atlantic military alliance and other international institutions that has buttressed European security and stability for decades, situation for a military confrontation remains grave.²⁷ Although on March 13, during an emergency meeting of the Security Council, Russia told the UN that 'it does not want war' with Ukraine²⁸ but Russia won't be silent if a military confrontation takes place.

For Russia, Ukraine is a strategic country and the rationale behind its involvement in the latter is Moscow's national interest, ethnicity and to re-establish its influence as a 'great power'. Ukraine is a breadbasket and a natural gas chokepoint in a pivotal spot in north of the Black Sea. Russia is searching for strategic depth in its West and Ukraine is an important asset to it. Russia, which straddles Europe and Asia, can preserve its 'Eurasian identity' through its alliance with Ukraine.²⁹ In such a situation, Russia is sceptical of a pro- EU/US Ukraine. Also the Russian fleet in the Black Sea counts on its Sevastopol port for year-round access (via Istanbul) to the warm waters of the Mediterranean and then to the Atlantic. It fears that the new pro-West interim government may stop Moscow's access through this route. The insecurity is reasonable given Russia's lease on the Sevastopol naval base is expiring in 2017. Though the lease was extended until 2042 shortly after President Yanukovich came to office in 2010, Russia fears it could now be revoked.³⁰

Turning eastern Ukraine into a battlefield would disrupt Moscow's critical industry,

agriculture, and oil and gas sales in the region.³¹ The Russian gas pipelines that supplies gas to Europe also provides gas to Ukrainian factories that produce steel, petrochemicals, and other industrial goods for sale to Russian markets.³² . Russia's financial market is facing a tough situation as the RTS (Russian Trading System) stock index declined to 22.7 per cent during January-February 2014 and the performance of the Russian currency faltered to 9.9 per cent against the dollar by the first week of March 2014.³³ Goldman Sachs predicted that the economic growth of Russia in 2014 has slashed down to 1 per cent from 3 per cent.³⁴

Conclusion

The Ukrainian crisis has revived rivalry between the US and Russia, even though both the governments do not want to acknowledge it openly. It is a 'great game' of national and strategic interests for both the camps. The US maintains that its involvement in the crisis is because of its support to the EU, an ally, and its stand for the ideals of democracy and people's freedom. But one cannot overlook US' own strategic interest in the region as Ukraine is a potential "gold mine" of agricultural and energy. US agribusiness giant, Cargill, on December 12, 2013 said that it bought a stake in a grain terminal in the port of Novorossiysk to bolster its access to export facilities in the Black Sea. This was the US company's first investment in Ukraine.³⁵

For Russia, Ukraine is a strategic asset in strengthening its hold in its former Soviet bloc. The situation for Russia is gloomy economically and it would try to avoid any military confrontation as it will further weaken and destabilize its economy. At the same time it won't remain quiet at the face of a confrontation which is most unlikely given the global economic situation. Presently, although the sanction that has been imposed on Russia by the US and the EU has not affected the former but Moscow should avoid a situation like that of Iran (which is unlikely). Russia's gas export is important for Europe and Ukraine but if a breakthrough is achieved by the US led camp with Iran then Moscow might be in weaker position.

Stakes are high for Russia as Crimea has 'come back' to its motherland and will have high expectations in terms of political and socio-economic growth. Hence, Russia will have to help the country prosper and develop in order to have its own economic growth and peace and stability in the region.

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

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