

Historical Background and Major Causes of the Increasingly Complicated Russia – Ukraine Crisis

Introduction

The current Ukrainian crisis has brought Russia and the West face to face, putting the world on the verge of a new global conflict between Russia and the US-led NATO. The risk of escalation is so high that many Western experts have been studying the conflict's history. The unexpected dynamics of the Ukraine crisis have prompted many observers to consider a new "cold war" analogy.

Because of its geostrategic location, Ukraine was unable to maintain neutrality during the Cold War. Ukraine joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Partnership for Peace Initiative of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1994. The decline of Russia's power provided a striking opportunity for Ukraine to align itself with the West, particularly with the United States of America. While improving the shining hour, Ukraine took a step forward in 2002 by forming a military alliance with NATO under the name "NATO Ukraine Action Plan." Ukraine, on the other hand, tried and failed to secure a permanent seat in NATO. Ukraine's political and social unrest began in November 2013.

Later, the situation in Crimea became extremely fragile. In March 2014 the unrest began, and the Russian parliament approved Putin's request that Russia's interests in Crimea be protected. Russia was concerned about the deterioration of the situation in Ukraine. Following talks in Geneva between the United States and Russia, Ukraine temporarily halted its military operations until it could determine Russian compliance with the Geneva agreement. The Geneva agreement instilled distrust between Ukraine and Russia. Following these developments, the Ukrainian government sought the assistance of the United States and the United Kingdom in order to prevent Russian opposition in the region, and it also decided to establish a National Guard force of 60,000 personnel to push back pro-Russian militaries in East Ukraine. Meanwhile, protests swept through Kyiv, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine.

Ukraine is heavily reliant on foreign aid from the EU and the US because it is unable to bring the country back to normalcy on its own. Russian forces invaded Crimea and seized Ukrainian military bases, while Ukrainian troops were unable to push back Russian forces.¹ The Russian parliament approved Putin's appeal to protect Russia's interests in Crimea in March 2014. Russia was concerned about the deterioration of the Ukrainian situation. Following the same year's April talks in Geneva between the US and Russia, Ukraine temporarily suspended its military operations until Russia complied with the Geneva Agreement. When the US State Department accused Russia of organizing pro-Russian military groups in eastern Ukraine, the crisis erupted. Today, the situation is resembling an international game in which Russia and the US are playing their cards around Ukraine. Both countries accuse one another of violating the Geneva agreements. They later became a component of the "Normandy Four" of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, as well as the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine comprised of Russia, the OSCE, and Ukraine, known in modern diplomacy as the September 5, 2014 Minsk Agreements.

The Ukraine crisis is international in scope, with numerous stakeholders involved. Numerous significant considerations emerge when analyzing Western-Russian relations since the end of the cold war and the fall of the Soviet Union. The West prioritized NATO expansion over Russian interests, alienating Russia while pursuing strict policies to ensure its security.²

Historical Background

Mutual border claims, dual citizenship, and other minor issues contributed to the tense relations between Ukraine and Russia. Relations between the two have seen many ups and downs, but NATO's expansion to the east, both in the past and now, has bred inconsistency in their relations. In addition to the aforementioned political and economic factors, there are shared cultural values and general patterns of thought stemming from both countries' long and contentious histories, which are frequently referred to as soft power. The Pereyaslav Treaty of 1654, for example, on the unification of the Cossack Hetmanate and the Tsardom of Moscow, played a significant role in shaping specific stereotypes and mindsets of the elite as well as public perception in both Ukraine and Russia.

As a result, many Russians, Ukrainians, and even people of other ethnicities living in both countries believe that Ukraine has been an integral part of Tsarist Russia since the 17th century, for nearly 360 years of their mutual history. Since the Treaty of Andrusovo in 1667, only the north-eastern part of modern-day Ukraine has been a part of Russia. According to Russia and Poland, Ukraine is divided primarily along the Dnieper River. Except for Galicia, which became part of Austria in 1772 and remained that way until Austria-defeat Hungary's in 1918 by the end of World War I, Russia received the rest of Ukrainian territory during the 18th century in three partitions of Poland. Ukraine's current southern regions, including Odesa and Crimea, were never a part of the country. These territories became a part of the Russian Empire at the end of the 18th century as a result of the Russo-Turkish war. Formerly a part of Czechoslovakia and Hungary. The Russian Empire never included Galicia, Bukovina, or Transcarpathian Ukraine. However, they were annexed as a result of Stalin's decision during World War II. In 1939, Western Ukraine was reunited with the Soviet part of Ukraine. It was previously a part of Poland. These facts support the idea of Ukraine's historical unity with Russia. However, there is one serious source of internal conflict in Ukrainian society. After all, it is not only political development, linguistic and ethnocultural differences that distinguish their identities, but also religious differences. The Russian population is predominantly Orthodox, whereas Ukrainians have traditionally practiced Orthodox and Catholicism since the 16th century. This is because different parts of Ukraine belonged to Poland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, or Romania at different points in time. In this regard, it is entirely natural for the majority of Ukrainians to regard their country as part of Eastern and Central Europe, rather than simply as a former Soviet republic.

Present Status of Ukraine

Ukraine maintains cordial relations with its immediate neighbors, including Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. They recognize Ukraine as a sovereign country within its current borders. Romania has territorial claims against Ukraine but has never opposed Ukraine's independence. Except for Georgia and Ukraine, Russia's near abroad refers to former Soviet territories that are now members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). It is worth noting that Georgia's withdrawal from the CIS was also motivated by a military conflict with Russia. Currently, the CIS includes countries such as Moldova, Armenia, and Tajikistan. Except for the fact that they were all part of the former Soviet system and, before that, Russia, these countries have very little in common. For Ukraine, the term "near abroad" refers to countries in Central and Eastern Europe that were never a part of the Soviet Union.

Ukraine is geopolitically linked to a vital part of the Central European and Black Sea region. Without a doubt, some difficulties in Russian-Ukrainian relations reflect the fact that Russia lacks unanimity on the delimitation of its borders and the national identity of its people. Non-Russian nationalities, for example, pose a serious problem within national-territorial autonomies. Internal complexities of this nature lead to a tightening of Russia's foreign policy toward neighboring countries. This holds true not only for Ukraine, but also for Estonia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and a few other countries. Some Russian political analysts believe that Russia should recognize the existence of an territorial integrity of Ukraine. They believe that there are some shining examples of erasing differences in this regard, such as US-Canadian, US-British, and Finnish-Norwegian relations, among others.

According to the experts at the consulting firm Baker Tilly, natural gas accounts for approximately 40% of Ukraine's primary energy sources. Ukraine will be able to meet its gas needs using its own resources and will no longer be forced to rely on gas imports. They also mention that over the last 15 years, the annual volume of gas extraction has ranged between 18 and 21 billion cubic meters.³ According to Ukraine's draft energy strategy, natural gas production in Ukraine is expected to increase to 44.4 billion cubic meters by 2030, accounting for 90 percent of the country's gas consumption.⁴ Ukraine's position in the oil and gas sector will be limited to resolving the issue of diversifying raw material supply sources and rejecting the practice of reliance on Russia. Ukraine had considered diversifying its energy supply by establishing connections with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.⁵ Despite these efforts and contradictions, Ukraine will remain the largest and most powerful state in the post-Soviet space after Russia, as well as the most important trading partner, which has a significant impact on the strategic situation in Central and Eastern Europe. Many experts recall Zbigniew Brzezinski's former National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter's view of Ukraine's importance in "geopolitical pluralism and containment of Russian expansion."⁶

Analysis of Major Causes of the Crises

The involvement of Russian geostrategic interest in Ukraine is the very first and crucial cause of the crisis. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union maintained strict control over Ukraine. It wished to maintain the status quo even after Ukraine's independence. However, due to the waning power of Boris Yeltsin, the former Russian president, Russia has been unable to maintain stable and reliable relations with its traditional allies, including Ukraine. The major issues that Russia was dealing with were financial crises and Western interference in its vital territorial security areas. Russia is extremely sensitive and concerned about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union being encircled (EU). As a result, Vladimir Putin is eager to extend his influence over the mutilated states on his borders in order to create a fearless environment in the surrounding strategic buffer zones. Second, Russia's obsession with obtaining Ukraine's rich resources, such as oil, gas, and crops, is one of the primary causes of the crises. Similarly, Russia is deeply concerned about the West's influence in the region.⁷ It is not an exaggeration to say that Russia regards Ukraine and its mutilated parts as geostrategic depth, and it is fighting tooth and nail to have a free ride in the region. The West's influence in the region, manifested in alliances with NATO and the EU, is detrimental to Russia's interests. Third, Russia had ethnic interests because some Ukrainian nationals are ethnically Russians, practice orthodox Russian religion, and have religious, economic, and cultural homogeneity.

Fourth, following the demise of the former USSR, the West maintained her gaze on the divided parts and embarked on a policy to bring about reforms in the form of democracy, capitalism, and human rights preservation. The main goal, however, was to keep Russia at bay and allow NATO to establish deeper roots of influence in the region.⁸ While Vladimir Putin was aware of the threat of encirclement, he remained vigilant and vehemently opposed Western advancement and encroachment. As a result, the West's covetous desires cannot be ruled out in the Ukraine crisis.

The fifth cause of the Ukrainian crisis can be seen in the form of indigenous or local issues such as ethnic and economic. For example, the opposition and protesters' inclination toward the EU and West was motivated by economic interests in the form of trade and technical assistance from them.⁹ They perceived that economic relations with the West provided more economic benefits than economic relations with Russia, whereas Russia was unwilling to lose her circle of influence. The second issue was ethnic, despite the fact that Ukraine is home to a large number of ethnic minorities.¹⁰ Russia was interested in helping ethnic Russians in Southeast Ukraine, such as Donbass and Luhansk regions, and is said to have provided military and economic assistance to them. The anti-Russians desired agreements with the West in order to achieve economic development and to end the strife caused by Russia's ethnic interests.

Conclusion

The current crisis in Ukraine is determined by the harsh diplomatic bargaining between the United States and Russia. In the current situation, it is divided into four parts - the Russian Crimea, two rebellious and autonomous regions in the South and Central Ukraine. Russia has already launched the Crimean scenario – the Russian parliament recognized the rebellious Southern regions as sovereign ones. Now, either NATO agrees to sign the Treaty proposed by Russia on the non-inclusion of the former Soviet republics into NATO, or Russia will continue to create a network of pro-Russian buffer states on the periphery of its borders in Eastern Europe. Therefore, the recognition of two Ukrainian regions by the Russian Parliament of new sovereign states is more than a move in the game as legitimation of the new geopolitical reality in Eastern Europe. It is also worth considering that both in Europe itself and within NATO there is no consensus on the conflict with Russia. Most likely, the parties will agree on the status quo of the demarcation line.

So, the most mattering political shifts in strategic regions and Globe are ahead.

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