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Handling the Ukraine Crisis: A Geopolitical Perspective

With the Ukraine crisis increasingly acute, there is growing danger of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, involving a significant possibility of escalating into a full-scale war between Russian and the NATO. At the core of the crisis is how to strike an agreement on durable geopolitical order to which Ukraine is central as a crucial strategic buffer between Europe and the Eurasia, or between a peninsula and a landmass. Thus, prescribing a geopolitical settlement is more necessary than ever.

1. The Ukraine Question

In the post-Cold War context of the significant NATO enlargement into all the once Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe and Soviet Baltic republics, the U.S. political circles have continually discussed Ukraine's participation in the NATO. This will completely strip Russia of a valuable strategic buffer that remains persistently essential, as long as there exist different and, often, conflicting political cultures and national interests between the country and the West. Already in the late 1990s, the Ukraine Question was obvious because it involves defining what Europe is all about and where its outer limit lies². Retrospectively, in the negotiation on unification of West and East Germany in 1990, the Soviet Union accepted it together with the continued NATO membership of unified Germany, in return for no NATO expansion toward East. Nonetheless, the NATO Bucharest Summit of 2008 recognized Ukraine's candidacy for NATO membership, although Russia opposed it.

U.S. approach to Ukraine has fluctuated over the G.W. Bush (2001~2009), Obama (2009~2017), Trump (2017~2021) and Biden(2021~present) Administrations. It is well known that the Bush administration zealously pursued liberal democratic enlargement by taking advantage of the U.S. unipolar moment after the Cold War. In 2004, the pro-Western Orange Revolution overthrew the pro-Russian Ukrainian administration, in the context of a series of Colour Revolutions behind which the U.S. intelligence circles are believed to have done significant manoeuvring, both overtly and covertly³. In 2014, the Ukrainian presidential election resulted in an anti-Russian change of government, to which Russia responded by annexing the Crimea populated overwhelmingly by ethnic Russians with strong historical ties at least since 1783. Subsequently, amid the ideological inertia, the declining U.S. hegemon under Obama, in coordination with other major Western powers, imposed significant economic sanctions on Russia. Then, the Trump administration, while continuing the sanctions, deemphasized persistent American antagonism against Russia to prioritize coping with growing China's challenge against declining U.S. hegemony. Yet, the Biden administration has renewed Obama's anti-Russian line, even under the continuing hegemonic decline.

2. A Geopolitical Perspective

A strategic buffer situated between land and sea powers is constantly subjected not only to their political, economic and cultural influence but also to military pressure, invasion and even occupation. Given the rise and fall of these powers, a buffer may be controlled by or sided with one of them at a particular phase of history, but, overall, a half of it has an open and decentralized domestic political order while the other half a closed and centralized one. In modern times, they respectively have a close affinity with liberal democracy or authoritarian regime.

Thus, the population of such a buffer is prone to internal socio-political conflict, further compounded by the existence of ethnic minorities if linked to either a sea or a land power. It often possesses a strong yet ambiguous national identity and, plausibly, an aspiration for unification and strategic independence. However, *ceteris paribus*, approximately halving a buffer constitutes a stable equilibrium in regional turf competition between two coequal sea and land powers. Should an extra-regional factor, such as intervention or withdrawal of a global hegemon, come into play to upset an equilibrium, unification of a divided buffer would become possible. This inquiry will explore if the dynamics can be applied to explain the increasingly unstable state of Ukraine.

3. The Domestic Dynamics of Ethnic Politics

Elusive national identity in a strategic buffer is often highlighted on the grand chessboard of sea vs. land powers, because it may provide them with some good room for interference, intervention and, possibly, invasion to influence or control local population to their advantage. On the other hand, local population tends to develop two distinctively different political cultures that are similar to or at least greatly influenced by either a proximate sea or land power. In-between, there is a significant portion of the population with hybrid characteristics, while their geographic gradation and distribution differ case by case.

The Ukrainian case is burdened with complicated ethnic conditions involving elusive national identities. Historically, the triune Russian nation – White, Little and Great Russians (respectively, Belarussians, Ukrainians, Russians) – has shared their linguistic origin in the Old East Slavic, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the overall political culture based on them, with a notable exception of the Eastern Catholic population in Galicia which used to a part of the Austro-Hungary Empire. From a macro-historical perspective, the three Russians have a good chance for reintegration comparable to European integration, although its specific form remains to be seen, single unified state, federation or confederation.

Yet, the prospect for reintegration may only be entertained in a distant future because the state of affairs has been greatly compounded over the modern and current history. The Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (henceforth, Donbas), an eastern part of Ukraine bordering Russia where a significant ethnic Russian population resides, is a historically Russian land that was incorporated forcibly by Germany into Ukraine through the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of 1918, followed by extensive migration to the Donbas during the Soviet era. Besides, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev (1953-1964), who was a Ukrainian himself, willy-nilly incorporated the Crimea Peninsula into Ukraine despite the significant modern and current historical ties with Russia and ethnic Russians as an overwhelming majority of local population, on the no-longer tenable assumption that the Soviet Union shall exist forever. Those Russians in both “legally” Ukrainian territories have possessed Russia’s domestic passport that entitles them as Russian nationals to vote its national elections. The Russian government is legally obligated to protect them against possible atrocity by a third country, especially by Ukraine⁴. It is imperative to go beyond emphasizing the formalistic importance of the territorial integrity and political independence of post-Soviet Ukraine.

4. The Minsk Protocols

As a rule of thumb, the established approach to intractable ethnic conflicts is to grant full autonomy and self-government to a minority population within the framework of the sovereign nation-state concerned, together with an agreement with the neighbouring one in which the same ethnic population holds an overwhelming majority. The approach is only feasible if the two states respect preserving peace and security under the status quo with a strong will to depoliticize the ethnic question, especially if without any significant geopolitical power competition impact. Italy’s South Tyrol Autonomous Province bordering Austria is the case in point. Thus, it is crucial to identify which party reject the approach to the current Ukrainian crisis, Russia, Ukraine or Russian-dominated Donbas.

True, both Russia and Ukraine agree with the self-government approach in principle, but disagree on what constitutes genuine Donbas self-government or de facto Russian occupation⁵. In June 2014, a war between the separatist forces of the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, and the Ukrainian government erupted as part of the aftermath of the anti-Russian Ukrainian (so-called, Orange) Revolution and the Euromaidan movement. To end the war, representatives of Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) formed the Trilateral Contact Group, with mediation by the leaders of France and Germany in the so-called Normandy Format. The Group stroke two protocols in Minsk, Belarus (Minsk Protocol I & II), respective of July 2014 and February 2015, regarding ceasefire, confidence-building measures and early implementation local election for Donbas self-government according to the existing Ukrainian law. Yet, both of them collapsed due to the overall lack of mutual confidence consequent on a chain of battles, while one or the other side was arguably culpable at a particular phase⁶. Notably, even under the ongoing acute crisis, the self-government approach in the Minsk Protocol II remains the basis for any future resolution to the Donbas conflict, especially now⁷. It begs the question of why the Donbas conflict is no longer a protracted low-intensity warfare with continuing diplomatic endeavours for settlement.

5. U.S.-Russia Strife over the Status Quo

The current acute crisis, therefore, indicates that the U.S. and Russia are vying to change or maintain the regional status quo, rather than to preserve it by containing the Donbas ethnic conflict through the self-government approach. More specifically, the conflict is epiphenomenal to U.S.-Russia rivalry over NATO expansion to Ukraine, not a primary phenomenon per se that might escalate into a U.S.-led NATO war with Russia. Russian President Putin essentially demands that the U.S. shall not accede to Ukraine's NATO membership. Once Ukraine is admitted to a NATO membership, the organization has to provide collective self-defence for the country, making Russia's attack highly risky and, possibly, a debacle. Then, if Russia would like to annex the Donbas, it would have to act now than later. Conversely, should Russia annex the Donbas, the NATO should not be able to admit Ukraine's membership without preparing itself for a war with Russia.

Naturally, both the U.S. and Russia are engaged in an intense battle of mutual condemnation and sabre rattling. At the behavioural level, Russian appears very aggressive because it is increasingly relying on military instruments, particularly military exercises of more than 150 thousand soldiers with a large number of land, aerial and naval platforms in those areas in Russia and Belarus that are very close to Ukraine as well as in the Black Sea. On the other hand, the U.S. and European NATO allies are strongly condemning Russia while dispatching a far smaller size of infantry forces to countries close to Ukraine, including nine thousand of U.S. soldiers, and providing Ukraine with weapons, including portable anti-tank missiles. At the level of strategic intent, the U.S. is aggressive in changing the status quo, while Russia is defensive in preserving it. Yet, international law illegitimizes aggressive behaviour, not intent. In the event of its armed attack against Ukraine, Russia would surely be labelled as a rogue state under international law and in a court of world opinion that is heavily influenced Western international media.

6. Risks and Resultants

It begs the question of why the U.S.-led West is bringing Russia to bay in propaganda war while committing significant risks of a full conventional war with it. Russia still possesses strategic nuclear parity against the U.S., ensuring strategic stability between the two through mutual assured destruction. This rather legitimates the authoritarian Putin administration, at least domestically, as guarantor of national security, not of liberal democracy and prosperity, particularly now due to possible NATO expansion to Ukraine. In addition, Russia enjoys a large conventional military advantage over the U.S. in the Ukraine theatre of operation, given that the U.S. greatly suffers the tyranny of distance. It is plausible that Russia would wage a war to annex the Donbas for preventing the NATO expansion, once the Donbas separatists authority should request its annexation with Russia on the basis of a popular referendum, particularly because the Russia's Duma has already passed a resolution for such an independence⁸, out of rising Russian nationalism in tandem with Putin's enhanced legitimacy.

The U.S. government and military have released a steady stream of information on the ever-intensifying state of Ukraine crisis, while the Western media has hyper-actively propagated the image that Russia is about to invade Ukraine, involving a strong self-fulfilling prophesy effect. Already, President Biden has unequivocally stated that, even in the event of Russia's invasion to Ukraine, he will send no U.S. forces to the country⁹. Instead, the U.S. will impose strong economic sanctions against Russia. Yet, the sanctions will hardly be effective, given that Russia has already developed significant capacity to resist because it has survived those imposed after its invasion to Crimea in 2014. Moreover, Russia will probably be unaffected to such sanctions, because China is willing to purchase the oversupply of Russian oil and gas. This will enable Russia to reduce great vulnerability dependency on the U.S.-led West for stable macro-economic performance. Russia has already secured significant room for strategic manoeuvring. From a Russian viewpoint, therefore, the U.S. approach implies that an invasion to the Donbas would be overlooked before Ukraine becomes a NATO member.

Rather it would be Europe, especially Germany, that would suffer most by making itself unable to import Russian natural gas on which it depends as a major source of energy. Germany has reluctantly accepted U.S. hard-line against Russia to postpone starting operation of the recently completed Nord Stream 2 pipeline that is design to secure stable natural gas supply from Russia. This means that the German policy is subordinated to the U.S. line that will force Europe as a whole to face an energy crisis

Thus, it is not difficult to see that the U.S. hard-line to the Ukraine crisis will eventuate in a face-down between the West and Russia in which the latter would likely outplay the former, both militarily and geo-economically. This is making it very hard for Germany to continue its obedient alignment of its Russia policy with the hard-line that involves interruption of Russian gas supply and, as a result, macro-economic hardship. Thus, bulldozing the hard-line effectively constitutes a veiled geo-economic offense against Germany that has tried to lead Europe for reconciliation with Russia, prompting Germany to become strategically independent of the U.S. hegemon toward multipolarity.

On the other side of the globe, Japan as the world largest liquefied natural gas (LNG) importer is called upon to provide Europe with spare reserve of it¹⁰ for supply. Yet, this will only work as short-term crisis management, because the country has only limited spare gas and because LNG is significantly more expensive than pipelined gas. To make the matter worse, Japan would have to stop importing Russian gas, which currently occupies some 10% of the total imports, if it would participate in U.S-led West's economic sanctions against Russia in the event of its invasion to Ukraine. Japan would also experience economic hardship by aligning itself with the U.S. hard-line.

An economic sanction makes sense only if the sanctionee bears significantly higher costs than the sanctioner. Evidently, the payoff of economic sanctions against Russia remains highly problematic, which may weaken the solidarity between the U.S. hegemon and major allies and debilitate the U.S. hegemony.

7. A Proposal

Evidently, all the parties involved in the Ukraine crisis will be better off with a diplomatic settlement, rather than with a Russia-Ukraine war, West's economic sanctions against Russia, and a protracted confrontation between the West and Russia.

Certainly, Russian will be able to survive such a confrontation by relying on China, but it may also like to avoid exclusive reliance on China, a hegemonic aspirant land power, that has expressed the territorial claim on Russia's Maritime Territory and, potentially, an ambition to occupy the sparsely populated Eastern Siberia. In fact, Russia needs to continue significant economic relations with the West as a major counterweight against China.

Hence, all the parties are recommended to return to the Minsk Protocol II and build an effective system that allows full self-government for the Donbas within Ukraine. At the same time, they also have to agree on no NATO membership for Ukraine, and instead make necessary arrangements to keep Ukraine as a strategic buffer between the West and Russia either in the form of a neutral country or a Finlandized state.

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Footnotes:

- ¹ IFIMES – International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies, based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, has Special Consultative status at ECOSOC/UN, New York, since 2018.
- ² Takayasu Murayama, “Rethinking Cold War History: An Essay (in Japanese)”, St. Andrew’s University Bulletin of Research Institute, Vol. 23, No. 2, December 1997, pp. 11-12, [weblink](#), February, 13, 2022.
- ³ The operation arms include the National Endowment for Democracy, International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute and Freedom House. See, Ian Traynor, “US campaign behind the turmoil in Kiev”, Guardian, November 26, 2004, [weblink](#).
- ⁴ “Ukraine conflict: Moscow could 'defend' Russia-backed rebels”, BBC News, April 9, 2021, [weblink](#), accessed on February 13, 2022.
Ann Simmons, “At Russia’s Border with Ukraine, Pro-Kremlin Separatists Find Support”, Wall Street Journal, February 13, 2022, [weblink](#), accessed February 15, 2022.
- ⁵ Duncan Allan, “The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia’s War in Eastern Ukraine”, Chatham House, May 20, 2020, [weblink](#), accessed on February 13, 2020.
- ⁶ David R. Cameron, “After flurry of high-level diplomacy and another long Normandy format meeting, threat of war in Ukraine continues”, MacMillan Center, February 11, 2022, [weblink](#), February 13, 2022.
- ⁷ “Ukraine deal with pro-Russian rebels at Minsk talks”, BBC News, September 20, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29290246>, accessed on February 13, 2022. “Ukrainian peace talks lead to buffer zone deal”, CBS News, September 20, 2022, [weblink](#), accessed on February 13, 2022.
- ⁸ “Russian Duma chair calls to recognize Donbas independence from Ukraine”, Jerusalem Post, January 21, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-694173>, accessed on February 13, 2022. “Russian parliament may delay vote on recognizing eastern Ukraine”, Reuters, February 11, 2022, [weblink](#), accessed on February 14, 2022.
- ⁹ John Wagner and Ashley Parker, “Biden says U.S. ground troops ‘not on the table’ for Ukraine”, Washington Post, December 8, 2021, [weblink](#), accessed February 13, 2022.
- ¹⁰ Yuka Obayashi and Marwa Rashad, “Japan to divert LNG to Europe amid Russia-Ukraine tension”, Reuters, February 10, 2022, [weblink](#), accessed on February 15, 2022.