Ukraine Crisis and its impact on Regional Security Environment

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Introduction

Events unfolding in East Europe are transforming the security environment in the region as political instability in Ukraine and Crimea's annexation by Russia has impacted the region deeply. President Yanukovych's government collapsed in Ukraine, in February 2014 in the wake of large scale protests against his decision to join NATO and European Union. Growing political unrest in Ukraine, the mobilization of Russian forces in eastern Ukraine and Crimea's annexation by Russia are important developments. They are all occurring in a neighborhood where interests of several states overlap and are likely to shape the future security environment in the whole region.

Crisis erupted in Ukraine when protestors came out in the streets in Kiev against the government due to some political and economic reforms and foreign policy shift towards the western countries. The government of Yanukovych was toppled and he was forced to get asylum in Crimea. Political unrest in Ukraine and coming up of pro-western government in power in the country prompted Russia, which is the neighbor of Ukraine and has strategic interest in it, to annex Crimea. It may also be mentioned that a sizable portion of Ukrainian population is of Russian origin. They were inclined to support Russia against the new government's policies towards making Ukraine a part of western security and economic system. The article analyses causes of current Ukraine crisis along with the Russian annexation of Crimea and how these developments affect the security situation of the region.

There are three drivers of the Ukrainian crisis: one, NATO's efforts to expand into Russia's sphere of influence or the 'Near abroad'; second, EU expansion; and third, the orange revolution of 2004.[1] First two are external factors, which aimed at making Ukraine a part of west's economic and military sphere. The third factor is an outcome of the internal political dynamics within Ukraine which fueled unrest among the people.

The current crises started when Ukrainian President Yanukovych refused to implement Association Agreement[2] with the EU in November 2013. Under the Association Agreement the US and EU offered aid to economically troubled Ukraine. There was a counter aid offer from Russia which also agreed to provide it cheap natural gas. The tension between these major players, the EU and Russia, set the stage for the February 18-22, 2014 protests and President Yanukovych was forced to leave power.[3] The crisis unfolded when the rivalry between the major powers, so far restricted to economic sphere, escalated to military confrontation and Russia mobilized its forces against Crimea in eastern Ukraine.

Crimea was first conquered by Russia in 1783 from Ottoman rulers. The Tartar population of the area was subsequently deported to Central Asia during the Second World War by Russia's Catherine the Great. Naval base at Sevastopol was established by Russia in late eighteenth century and has remained under Russian control since then. Crimea became a part of Ukraine when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred it to Ukraine in 1954.[4] Even after Ukraine's independence in 1992-93 Russian naval fleet has remained stationed on the Black Sea port and it continues to use leased facilities in Sevastopol which lies within the territory of Crimean Peninsula.[5]

Ukraine crisis has impacted the security of the entire region because, for a long time, both EU along with the US and Russia have been trying to increase and strengthen their strategic positions and pursue their political objectives in the region. Both sides have been trying to make Ukraine part of their sphere of influence by supporting two different groups of political actors in Ukraine. The struggle for power between these two groups has caused internal instability in Ukraine which has provided space for foreign actors to play a role in the internal dynamics of the country.

Roots of the Ukraine crises: Post Cold War Regional Arrangements

Strategic importance of Ukraine is the main reason that provoked the two traditional rivals, the US and Russia, to once again confront each other after the Cold War. During the Cold War period both had tried to maintain their power in the region by dividing Europe along separate lines. Western Europe was dominated by the US under NATO alliance created in 1949, whereas eastern

Europe remained under the control of former Soviet Union under the Warsaw Pact, signed in 1955.

Since then the relationship between the two countries remained tense. Tension between the two states was also reflected in the policies of NATO and EU member countries, which have been strong allies of the US. The disintegration of Soviet Union in 1989 and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 had removed NATO's adversary in Europe. This new situation also necessitated a strategic re-evaluation of NATO's purpose, nature, tasks, and focus in the region. The Alliance's Strategic Conception, adopted by the States Parties of the Washington Treaty during a North-Atlantic Council's meeting (Rome, November 7-8, 1991),[6] confirmed the decisions made during the London Summit in July 1990. The members agreed on adoption of a new NATO doctrine. The objective of the new doctrine was to develop a modified strategy, which would meet the challenges emerging from changed geo-strategic conditions.[7] As a result of reassessment of NATO's future role it was decided that NATO should not only be kept intact it should be further expanded. The first post-Cold War expansion of NATO came with German reunification on October 3, 1990[8] when the former East Germany became part of the Federal Republic of Germany. With its integration with West Germany it also became a part of NATO.

During the 1990s US President Bill Clinton put in place a policy to expand US' political and economic influence in the constituencies of former Soviet Union, through promoting democracy and capitalist economy in eastern European countries.[9] He offered a plan called 'Partnership for Peace'[10] to gain influence in the former Warsaw pact countries. The US policy through its European allies was to limit the Russian power by its encirclement.[11] In post-Cold War era it was illogical for the US to continue its policy of containment of Russian power. Under the circumstances the best option for the US, to slow down a resurgent Russia, was the curtailment of its influence.

'The Partnership for Peace' policy not only provided cooperation with eastern European states but also ensured strong links between NATO members and the new democratic partners from the former Soviet Union. This framework facilitated NATO's expansion to include states closer to the Russian strategic sphere and also paved the way for other former Soviet Union states to enhance their partnership with NATO. This partnership was tested during the Bosnia and

Kosovo crises[12] when US conducted a peace keeping operation against the 'ethnic cleansing'[13] started by Slobodan Milosevic's government in Bosnia and ended with the signing of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accord.[14] This was also an event through which US underscored its strategic importance to its European partners and its permanent role in NATO.

The US and European Union further increased their influence in the Balkans through the pursuit of 'Partnership for Peace' by portraying it as a replacement of the Iron Curtain[15] which had divided the nations of Europe. Poland, Hungary, and Czech Republic were accepted by NATO as members in 1999,[16] and seven more eastern and central European countries; Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia became part of NATO in 1999.[17] Croatia and Albania joined in 2009.[18]

Russia opposed further expansion of NATO, seeing it as inconsistent with the understanding reached between Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and the US President George Bush Sr. in December 1989 during Malta Summit[19] that allowed only for a peaceful German reunification. NATO's expansion efforts were seen by Moscow as a continuation of a Cold War attempt to surround and isolate Russia.[20]

Ukraine's Internal Turmoil-the Beginnings of the Crisis

Several geo-political factors pushed Ukraine towards becoming a source of contention between major powers. It was however as noted earlier, Ukrainian internal political turmoil which primarily created opportunities for other powers to play a role and allowed them to push for promoting their own interests.

The ethnic and political divide within Ukraine has been a major cause of instability in the country. Historically Ukraine was dominated by Russia and its political and ethnic roots also lay in former Soviet Union. What constitute Ukraine territories now, were part of Czarist Russian empire during the 17th century till the end of the 18th century.[21] After the overthrow of Czarist Empire by the Communist revolution in early 20th century and the formation of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Ukraine also became a part of the new union. From 1959 to 1989 Soviet Union remained the center of power in the region, confronting the US in the Cold War period. After the disintegration of Soviet Union Ukraine became an independent state in December 1991.[22] Since then,

Ukraine has remained important for both eastern and western european countries.

Apart from these larger political and strategic developments Ukraine remains internally divided along distinct lines: The most obvious geographical dividing line is the Dnieper River which runs through the capital, Kiev, curls south-east to Zaporizhia and then turns back to empty into the Black Sea at Kherson.[23] These eastern and western lines also divide Ukraine on the basis of ethnicity, religion, politics and culture. The land in the western part known as Right Bank is populated by people of Ukrainian origin and the eastern part, known as Left Bank, is dominated by a Russian population.[24]

The bulk of Ukraine's Russian minority (17% of the total by the 2001 census) lives on the Left Bank (including Crimea) - and in Odessa, which had also voted for Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych.[25] The population in the west of the country, on the other hand, maintains strong cultural links with the rest of Central Europe. This internal divide today is pulling the country in two directions while a large section of the population is orientated towards Moscow, the other half desires to develop better links with the EU. Apart from Russian and Ukrainian population, the country also has ethnic Poles and Jews in its urban centers.[26]

After the elections of 2004, the two main political leaders, from eastern wing Viktor Yanukovych, and western wing, Viktor Yshchenko, supported by their regional backers tried to consolidate power over the entire country. Election victory of Viktor Yanukovych was attributed to vote rigging,[27] and a campaign against him was launched by the opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko. This resulted in the Supreme Court's decision which cancelled the poll results and ordered a reelection.[28] This phase of political unrest followed by new election, in which Viktor Yshchenko became the President of Ukraine, was called the Orange Revolution.[29]

The deep ethnic divide in the country posed a difficult problem for the government which was forced to choose between the EU and its next door neighbor Russia, with which it had natural ties. Both Russia and the EU offered a number of incentives to Ukraine. The US and EU offered aid packages to Ukraine to stabilize its economy in the form of closer relationship with EU and IMF.

Whereas Russia offered Ukraine $15 billion aid and cheap natural gas but also expected it to reject EU and IMF offers in response.[30]

Russian state owned gas supplier company, Gazprom, signed a contract with Ukrainian gas company Naftohaz Ukraine to supply gas to industrial consumers directly, ending a lingering row over gas supplies.[31] To stabilize the economy IMF also sanctioned a loan of $ 16.2 billion[32] to Ukraine in response to which Russia threatened by discontinuing gas supply to Ukraine.[33] However supplies were resumed after signing a 10-years deal on gas transit with Russia in 2009.[34] This development was viewed negatively by EU and eastern European counties as gas supply to these countries could be cut by Russia.

Yanukovych, after winning 2010 presidential election, signed an agreement to extend Russia's lease on the Black Sea base of Sevastopol in Crimea for 25 years.[35] This decision had a far-reaching effect on the European Union partnership deal in November 2013 and resulted in a huge and violent campaign to push him out of power. This movement is also referred to as second phase of Orange Revolution.

External Dimensions

Ukraine's relationship with NATO and Europe has been politically divisive and contributed to protests which resulted in the overthrowing of the President Yankovich's government which had been in power since 2010. After 2014 elections, pressure was built on the government for seeking NATO membership. Ukraine is one of eight countries in eastern Europe with an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) membership.[36] IPAP began in 2002, and is open to countries that have the political will and ability to deepen their relationship with NATO.

The EU with the support of Poland and Lithuania worked to block Ukraine's membership to Pro-Russian Eurasian Customs Union, and made an 'Association Agreement' with it to keep Russia out.[37] Despite the realization of the strategic importance of Ukraine to Russia, NATO and the EU with their unclear policy objectives contributed to fuelling of crisis in the region. Russia, contrary to Western expectation, used hard power to keep them at a distance.

In the wake of the 2014 Crimean crisis, a number of eastern European members of the Alliance pressed for NATO troops to be permanently stationed on their soil.[38] This development would have been at variance with the Founding Act of 1997[39], a cooperation agreement between Russia and NATO member states. This act stipulates,

> Refraining from the threat or use of force against each other as well as against any other state, its sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence in any manner inconsistent with the United Nations Charter and with the Declaration of Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States contained in the Helsinki Final Act.[40]

NATO however is of the view that it is not legally bound by that agreement. EU also followed the same pattern of enlargement as NATO by including eastern European countries in the Union. EU under its 2004 enlargement policy initialed the Association Agreement with Ukraine. Ukraine after Poland was the second most important eastern European country that was trying to join EU.

Russian annexation of Crimea, soon after the toppling of President Yankovich's government and deployment of troops in Crimean territory, altered entire security environment of the region. According to the Russian stance, people of Crimea gave them the right to take control of the area as they were threatened by Ukraine's government in power. In the backdrop of the crisis a referendum was conducted in Crimea by Russia according to which majority voted to join Russia.[41] President Putin visited Crimea to celebrate Russian victory, and described annexation of the peninsula as an act of restoring "historical Justness".[42] Referendum result, however, was not accepted by EU and the world community. The collapse of Ukrainian government resulted into political chaos and street protests, increasing tension between Russia, the US and its European allies.

Russian action in Ukraine is a response to NATO and EU expansion in an area which Russia considered its sphere of influence and essential to its own security. According to the Russian stance EU and NATO members had challenged its security and threatened it through encirclement also had the US backing.[43] Russian actions in Crimea and Ukraine have made it difficult for EU and NATO to pursue their strategic goals of regional economic integration, energy policy, and

diplomacy, while maintaining the security of their new partners and member states.

Strategic Importance of Ukraine and its impact on Regional Security Environment

The real source of Ukraine's importance has always been the Crimean peninsula which is a majority Russian-populated region with a strong Russian military presence. Ukraine is important to Russia to maintain its position in eastern Europe and Central Asia and Ukrainian port cities for it have significance in both economic and military sense. Sevastopol located in the Crimean peninsula serves as a major naval base for Russian navy. Moscow keeps 54 ships in Crimea[44], including an aircraft carrier, under a 1997 treaty[45], which gave Moscow a 20-year lease on this port.[46]

Russia's Black Sea Fleet played a major role in 2008 Georgian war,[47] and in 2013 Syrian crisis.[48] Syrian crisis has given further impetus to Russia's naval return on the eastern Mediterranean stage and prompted the need for Moscow to quickly upgrade its Russia Black Sea Fleet. At the height of Ukrainian crisis Russia sent 20 additional warships, three submarines, and also conducted naval exercises.[49] During the period when the US was threatening a military intervention in Syria, Russia maintained eleven units[50] in the eastern Mediterranean, as long as the crisis lasted. Currently Russian Black Sea fleet consists of a large force[51] and it is also planning for establishing a permanent Mediterranean base by 2015.[52]

It is important to view Ukraine within the framework of an energy-rich Eurasian corridor[53] that has been increasingly militarized by the US, especially under the Bush administration after 9/11. Ukraine is the key member of the Common Wealth of Independent States (CIS) and also an important member of GUUAM (Georgia, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) a military alliance formed by NATO.[54] Ukraine, like the other former Soviet republics along the EU's eastern border, has had a looser relationship with the EU than the countries which joined it from 2004 to 2007.[55] Ukraine is also important for the EU because of its long land border with EU states, which extends to over 1,300 Km.[56] In 2011 Ukraine was the 24th most important source of imports and 19th in the list of EU exports.[57] Ukraine also offers energy resources that the EU needs. It is one of the biggest producers of electricity in Europe. The country supplies electricity to four EU member states (Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and Romania).[58]

In addition, Ukraine has natural gas in significant quantities and shale gas resources that it is starting to develop.[59] In the energy sector, due to its geographical location, EU is largely dependent on Ukraine for Russian gas supply. Despite the fact that some of Russia's gas is routed to EU through the Belarusian gas transit system and Nord Stream Pipeline, Ukraine remains the most important transit country for Russian gas supply to Europe.[60] Ukraine has the potential to become even a bigger economic and trade partner for EU. Building LNG terminals on Georgian and Ukrainian coasts would increase the economic interdependence of neighboring EU countries and increase the availability of gas to countries in Europe.[61]

EU's and NATO's expansion towards the eastern part of Europe, and Russian annexation of Crimea has, disturbed the entire security environment of the region. After NATO's inclusion of some important eastern European countries like Poland, Hungry, Czech Republic, and Baltic countries, its attempts to include Ukraine, and Georgia in its fold in 2008, impacted regional stability. High stakes over Ukraine and Georgia led to the August 2008 Georgian war and resulted into the deterioration of the security situation in the region. Russian annexation of Crimea and control over eastern part of the Ukraine is another reflection of Russia's heightened threat perception.

Ukraine is of enormous importance to Russia as it plays the role of a buffer against western European states and by extension to the US at large. Russian deployment of approximately 30,000 troops[62] in the peninsula is considered a major security threat as large quantities of the gas and energy supply on which European countries are dependent, cross through the Black Sea. Russia is apparently preparing to counter all extra regional threats at all levels, such as the threat of US presence in Central Asia and its Pivot to Asia policy. A mobile SS-25 intercontinental ballistic missile fitted with the new warhead design was fired from a test complex in southern Russia to a target range in Kazakhstan.[63] It is also reported that Russia is trying to develop new capabilities to counter missile defense systems that the US is deploying in Europe.[64]

Conclusion

Europe had avoided projection of hard power in the region since the end of the WWII. Being dependent on NATO and the US for the use of military power it also did not posses sufficient independent means to consider such actions. Current

global political environment, the US and NATO engagement in Afghanistan and its recent experience in Iraq are not conducive to making any new military adventures. Russia has therefore moved unchallenged by flexing its military muscle to gain its political objectives. Russia has, in fact, sent a strong message by its actions in Ukraine, that it would not tolerate interference of external powers in what it considers its sphere of influence and areas vital to its own security. Crimea has security, economic and strategic importance for Russia and provides it with an opening to project its power not only in the Mediterranean but also to the Middle East via the Suez Canal.

There is another important player, China, which does not have direct stakes in the Ukrainian conflict but has considerable economic interest in this region. China after the US is the second largest buyer of oil and gas in the world. It would be in China's interest if Ukraine does not become a part of NATO and EU and growing Chinese and Russian relations in recent months would strengthen Russia's hand in the region. Rivals during the Cold War period, currently Russia and China are now building commercial ties across their 2,700-mile border. They have recently signed a deal worth $400bn, under which Russia will supply 38bn cubic meters (bcm) of gas to China over 30 years, starting from 2018.[65]

Crisis in Ukraine has brought into focus dynamics of international power with reference to emerging power of China and resurgence of Russian Federation after the Cold War. Russia has lately been asserting itself to protect its interests more openly. By mobilizing its forces on the Ukrainian border and ensuring a referendum in Crimea it has also demonstrated that it is not averse to use of hard power to protect its security interests. Russia's role in 2013 Syrian crisis, and Ukraine in 2014 is a manifestation of its confidence in its own power to maintain its central role in its sphere of influence. Moreover growing economic relations between two major powers, Russia and China, point to a new economic alignment which may morph into a security arrangement as the security interests of the two states further converge in future.

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Endnotes

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