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| Six Years and counting:  Origins of the Ukraine- Russian Conflict and Probable Solutions to Mitigate Intractability | Abstract  While the actions of both Ukraine and Russia since the Minsk agreements favor the argument that neither nation is willing to truly honor the cease fire lest the opposition uses the opportunity for another insurgency, I hypothesize there may be a solution to the conflict that does not involve NATO and EU allies which Russia distrusts, nor Soviet Nations that may favor Russia in negotiations over Ukraine.  Jaea Compton  International Conflict Resolution |

**Introduction: Ukraine and Russian, An Intractable Conflict?**

For nearly six years, a stagnated conflict has been waging amongst Ukraine and Russia for control of Ukraine’s southernmost terrain in Crimea and Donbass. While not necessarily the most violent or pressing of the world conflicts, this war has gained widespread Western attention due to political and economic implications that have impacted from Presidential impeachment hearings to nation economies. But presented and proposed solutions for resolving the conflict so far have not been productive in pacifying either side’s grievances and demands, nor have enacted a true ceasefire.

But will this conflict between Russia and Ukraine become one that is intractable? I hypothesize the answer is no; neither economy is stable enough especially with the current recession due to 2020’s global pandemic to continue the conflict indefinitely. But what complicates this issue is that there are three parties involved: Russia, its government and its forces, Ukraine, its government and its forces, and several Ukraine separatist groups that also need pacification in order for Ukraine to regain sovereignty within its own nation. This slight hiccup aside, this paper will introduce three probable solutions to address the main concerns regarding the annexation of Crimea, the interests of separatist groups, the role of Western influence within Ukraine, and justified sanctions against Russia.

**Crimea: Russian Retaliation**

Kyiv’s central square serves as the nation’s protest hub during any political arrest, from the 1990 protest demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Vitalii Masol, the 2004 Orange Revolution protest of alleged Russian rigged elections against Viktor Yushchenko, to the 2013,2014 protests for the removal of President Viktor Yanukovych, who unsurprisingly ran against Victor Yushchenko in the 2004 elections.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yanukovych’s renege of a commitment to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union read as a Pro-Russian concession, sparking outrage and weekly demonstrations.[[2]](#footnote-2) While Sunday demonstrations between November 2013 and February 2014 were relatively peaceful, escalating unrest led for President Yanukovych to authorize lethal force leaving at least 100 dead, and many more injured. Days later, the government of Ukraine officially fell with leaders fleeing to Russia, including President Yanukovych.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Though a temporary government filled the power void in Ukraine, Russia alleged the new administration lacked legitimacy, and one week later armed soldiers took over Crimea’s parliament. These soldiers were indeed Russian, though Putin’s administration denied so initially. The annexation of Crimea became finalized on March of 2014, with a referendum that offered two choices: autonomy through constitution restoration or to join the Russian Commons Union, where the overwhelming majority of voters chose the latter.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Donbas: Donetsk and Luhansk**

Regions that supported Russian interference, such as Odesa, Donetsk and Luhansk experienced clashes between Euromaidan and anti-Euromaidan (separatists) protestors, where separatists followed Russia’s playbook by overtaking government buildings, transportation hubs, and border crossings.[[5]](#footnote-5) April of 2014, Donetsk and Luhansk separatists declared the region an autonomous area, and held successful referendums in the next month. Much like the Crimean referendum, the vote overwhelmingly favored establishing distinct republics to that of Ukraine.[[6]](#footnote-6) There have been ongoing conflicts in Donbas since 2014.

Though Donbas has declared itself a free republic, it survives only on the goodwill of Russian economic assistance and trade.[[7]](#footnote-7) As the region culturally has deeper ties with Russian culture than with its own Ukrainian birthright, Russian citizen approval fiscally supporting Donbas remains high.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Russian Interests: Defend the Borders, Keep NATO at Bay**

The path to potential Russian invasion comes through Crimea.[[9]](#footnote-9) With the threat of NATO gaining access to southern Ukraine terrain through an alliance puts Russia’s security at risk in the current age of rising tensions with Western nations. The deposal of President Viktor Yanukovych, now portrayed as a Russian puppet, revealed to Russia the willingness of Ukraine’s central population to embrace the EU and Western idealism over the Russian Commons Union, and a potential step forward in obtaining NATO membership. By annexing Crimea and supporting separatist clashes among the border, Russia is ensuring Ukraine’s attention focuses squarely on squashing internal strife and not planning external alliances.

Russia’s objection to NATO expanding into Eastern European countries centers on the argument that NATO expansion shows Russia is stilled viewed as a geopolitical enemy despite the dissolution of the Cold War, and not having a comparable alliance to rely on in case of increased tensions with a NATO affiliated nation.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Ukraine moving towards an EU alliance also diminishes Russia’s influence in the region.

**Ukrainian Interests: End the War, Retain Sovereignty**

With Ukraine spending nearly 6% of its GDP on security and defense before the arrival of 2020’s economic crisis sustainability of military options was a major concern.[[11]](#footnote-11)

While regaining control of Crimea is near impossible, retaining Donbas without granting separatists autonomy is the current priority of Ukraine, lest yielding of the industrial center of Ukraine’s economic infrastructure spark another protest or government overhaul.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Failed Solutions Minsk, Minsk II:**

The Minsk agreement has not stopped aggression on either side of the conflict. More so, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Special Monitoring Mission reported in 2016 increasing escalations in agreement violations, though mainly in areas outside of governmental occupation.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Minsk II has stalled in implementation. Chatham House Associate Fellow Duncan Allan points out in “The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia’s War in Eastern Ukraine,” Minsk II is not an easy document to grasp.[[14]](#footnote-14) While not mentioning Russian responsibility, the stipulations of fair elections before retraction from Ukrainian borders, and Ukrainian constitutional reform leans heavily in Russia’s favor. In fact, by not stipulating demands for Russia to meet, the timeline lies within Russia’s hand. So far, this has meant little of the peace agreement has followed through.[[15]](#footnote-15)

To further investigate one of the more contentious points, the Minsk II agreement requires that local legitimate elections are held before Russia relinquishes border control in Ukrainian territories. However, this election has not happened in the last five years since the signing of Minsk II due to a myriad of reasons, one being the valid fear in separatists and Russian administrations of election fraud and subsequent vindictive crackdowns by the Ukrainian government.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Ukraine refuses to withdraw heavy weapons from the front line, discourage removal of foreign forces, or consider the Russian demand that constitutional reforms should provide Donbas with greater autonomy, as Russia has made no effort to deescalate on their end as well.[[17]](#footnote-17) Russian argument is that there are no foreign forces within Ukraine, merely volunteers. Drafting constitutional reforms to satisfy the Minsk II agreement caused a political protest, as the agreement point was deemed blackmail.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**Proposed Solution 1: Russian Compensation for Crimea**

Though claims of 90% plus support for the annexation referendum by Crimean citizens raises eyebrows, nearly 60% of Crimea’s population is ethnically Russian.[[19]](#footnote-19) And with greater cultural ties to Russia than Ukraine, the acceptance of annexation makes logistical sense for Crimea, however, the legality of the annexation will remain hotly contested across the international stage.[[20]](#footnote-20)[[21]](#footnote-21)

Where political diplomacy has failed to resolve the issue of Crimea, financial reparations may ease escalating tensions. Ukraine can claim the financial payment an acknowledgment of Russian wrongdoings, and Russia aid for the disadvantaged nation burdened by the cost of war. However each nation proposes to spin fiscal cooperation, this proposal can coincide with other multi track diplomatic incentives: propaganda collaborations, an agreement to mutual de-escalate tensions in Eastern Ukraine, offers of Russian citizenship to Eastern Ukrainians, military training and an agreement for Black Sea usage by both nations, so on and so forth.

This would not necessarily be a purchase of Crimea, but more in line with a severance package.

**Proposed Solution 2: Indian Peacekeepers as The Third Side**

Irving Studin, president of the 21st Century Questions think tank proposes that the security dilemma the Minsk and Minsk II agreement puts both Russia and Ukraine in can only be solved by peacekeeper troops.[[22]](#footnote-22) But, Studin argues, any European or Western affiliated peacekeeping troops would immediately garner distrust by Russia, as potential NATO officers or spies, and any former Soviet nation troops would warrant wariness fromUkraine.

Studin proposes Indian peacekeepers as a viable option, as they remain not only politically neutral in the conflict but have served as UN peacekeepers for over 70 years, volunteering 200,000 servicemembers to the United Nations.[[23]](#footnote-23) An alternative plan, created by Richard Gowan of the Hudson Institute, agrees that UN peacekeepers may be the most agreeable solution for both sides, though their proposition was to gather peacekeepers from Latin America and neutral European countries.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Even more, inviting India to mediate between Russia and Ukraine provides a platform for Modi to present itself as a major player on the international stage.[[25]](#footnote-25) With India’s increasing tensions with China, who also shares a border with Russia, India must find ways to assert itself as an equal power in the midst of China’s emergence as a contender for the next superpower. By establishing a diplomatic relationship with Russia, there is potential to build an ally within close proximity to Indian mainland in case a full fledge war breaks out between China and India.

For Ukraine, despite the newfound enthusiasm for peacekeeper forces to end the ongoing military clashes[[26]](#footnote-26), there is little to gain from the presence of any forces in Donbass. For President Zelensky, it would be the fulfillment of a campaign promise. For residence in war zones, it would mean alleviation of fear and horror. However, this solution does not address the grievances of either nation or separatist groups and mediation must accompany the acceptance of peacekeeping forces.

**Proposed Solution 3: US/EU/NATO and Russian concessions**

The most peaceful solution though most disadvantageous for the West, is for the EU, US, and NATO to cease exploring Ukrainian interests beyond what Russia already comfortably allows.

Ukraine has more economic ties to Russia than any other nation currently, with 8.6% of all Ukrainian exports to Russia.[[27]](#footnote-27) It would be to the nation’s disservice to not find a way to end the conflict while still retaining strong economic ties, especially with dwindling political support from not Normandy nations and no current economic prospects due to the global pandemic.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The emergence of China as a military and economic power can be used as leverage for justifying the easing of sanctions against Russia, and Russian interference within former Soviet States. Russia shares a border of considerable length with the China, who has in its recent skirmishes with India proven it is a nation willing to reclaim perceived stolen borderland.

By agreeing to not expand NATO membership in bordering Russian nations, if Russia agrees that NATO access can be granted for non-military operations in Ukraine (beyond those already performed in Ukraine under its Enhanced Opportunity Partner NATO status) and under Russian watch, both Russia and NATO might experience the best of both worlds.[[29]](#footnote-29) Russia would no longer worry about NATO access to its borders, and NATO still can form quasi alliances with nations in Eastern Europe. If Russia’s main interest is border security, there could be little objection to this proposal.

**Conclusion: Hybrid Solution**

I do not believe any of these solutions on their own will be enough to force both Ukraine and Russia to the table to create and ultimately sustain a peace agreement. However, a cumulation of these proposals has a greater chance of succeeding and encouraging all sides to participate for an equal win. I disagree with the first proposal entirely; compensation for Crimea sets Ukraine as the political loser for not regaining illegally annexed territory and provide Russia the political win. Russia would also suffer a political hit domestically, as Crimea was gifted to Ukraine; to pay to receive it back as Russian territory would be perceived as weakness.

But bringing in a third-party negotiator with seasoned peacekeeping forces with the prospect lessening intrusion into Ukrainian affairs and sanction relief by Western nations might be incentive enough to bring Russia to the table. Ukraine benefits from a true cease fire, and the ability to negotiate gas and oil prices, as well as continual economic partnership.[[30]](#footnote-30) But no matter the avenue, seeking the collective win is the most viable way to ensure lasting Russo-Ukrainian peace.

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