

Introduction

To most geopolitical pundits, the end of the Cold War in early 90s promised the dawn of peace emerging from the perceived conclusion of global super power rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union. Propelled by disintegration of the Soviet Union by end 1991 and the independence of its republics, based on ethnic affiliations and old historical boundaries, rekindled hope for political stability and economic resurgence in not only the once-constituents of the Soviet empire but the entire Baltics and nations of Eastern Europe as a whole.

The truism that more things change, more they remain the same could not be more apparent when one observes the unfolding of events, of the past few years, in one of the largest and strategically placed republics of the erstwhile Soviet Union, namely Ukraine. This hapless nation stands precariously today at the cusp of disintegration with serious geopolitical consequences reverberating far beyond its borders. Prompted by a rekindled power struggle between Russia and the European Union cum US axis, the Ukrainian crisis has assumed dangerous proportions for the world at large and Europe in particular. Over 5700 Ukrainians,¹ including a large number of innocent civilians have perished since the last one year, and, over a million displaced in their own nation owing to the largely unequal violent struggle between loyalist Ukraine forces and well equipped pro-Russian separatists in its eastern and south-eastern regions, bordering Russia. The Ukraine crisis, as unfolding, and if not determinedly managed by the world community, displays all the ingredients of becoming the worst nightmare, apart from global terrorism, to world order in this era.

Historical Background

Before proceeding further, it will be prudent to study the turbulent and bloody relationships in the past century of Russia and Ukraine, and, it will be apparent that the current situation owes its roots to this troubled legacy. With the collapse of the Tsarist Russian empire in 1917, Ukraine, a part of the empire, declared its independence in 1918 with numerous groups vying for control of its strategically located peninsular region. However, by 1921, with the emergence of the Red Army, two-thirds of Ukraine fell to the Communists and its western part became part of Poland. Communist dictator Joseph Stalin's 'collectivisation campaign' in 1932 resulted in nearly seven million peasants in Ukraine perishing in 'man-made famines.' 1937 in Ukraine was marked by mass executions by Stalinist purges against intellectuals. Ukraine, once again, was subjected to grave human tragedy with the advent of World War Two when five million Ukrainians died fighting the Nazi hordes including 1.5 million Jews who had been singled out by the Nazis.²

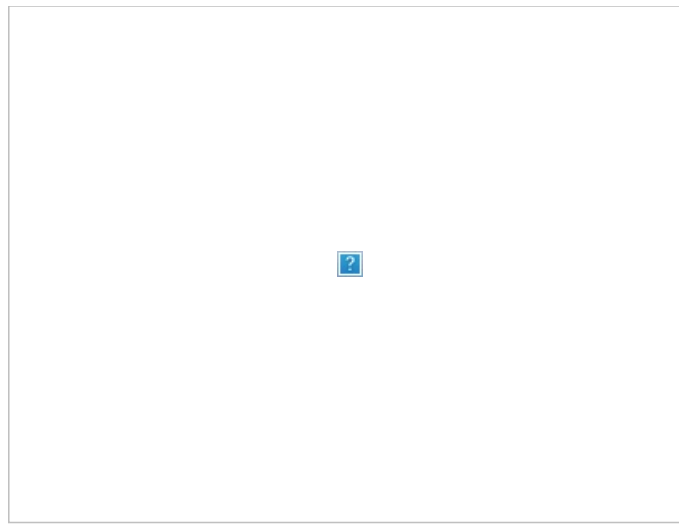
With the end of World War Two in 1945, Ukraine was conclusively annexed by the Soviet Union. It remained under Kremlin's jurisdiction for the next 45 years. It is pertinent to note that the powerful Secretary General of the Soviet Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev (himself a Ukrainian), in 1954, had transferred the strategically located Crimean peninsula to Ukraine as a 'gift'. It is worth recalling that, historically, Russia has always sought the Crimean peninsula and, accordingly, Russian Empress Catherine the Great had annexed Crimea in 1783. In identical vein as now, historically, most European powers always distanced themselves from Russian rulers (despite some royals being related with each other by blood) and this mindset had prompted, in the 18th century, Frederick the Great, to annexe territories of other European kingdoms, without taking into account the likely Russian reaction.

Ukraine: 1991 Onwards

The disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991 led to 90 per cent Ukrainians voting for independence from the Soviet Union; now represented by the Russian led Commonwealth of Independent States and later the Russian Federation. Peaceful yet uneasy relations were sustained between Russia and Ukraine owing to economic linkages continuing for a few years after Ukraine became independent. In addition, Ukraine, in an act of goodwill and with no future nuclear ambitions, had handed over to Russia all nuclear weapons it was holding as part of the Soviet Union.

All along, Ukraine sincerely endeavoured to pursue neutrality in its foreign affairs by ensuring a balancing act between NATO and Russia. Both NATO and the European Union also left no stone unturned to influence Ukraine to wean it away from Mother Russia and into its economic and security fold, however, without much success. Yet, no alliance came forward to guarantee Ukraine's adherence to neutrality, something on the lines of Finland during the Cold War. Map 1 shows the central position of Ukraine between East Europe and Russia.

Ukraine and its Neighbourhood



Source www.nbcnews.com

Map 1

In 1997, however, Russia and Ukraine signed a Friendship Treaty and an agreement was also reached on the continued deployment of Russia's powerful Black Sea Fleet in Crimea which was in Ukrainian territory. The Black Sea Fleet, headquartered in Sevastopol, is tasked to look after Russian maritime interests in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean besides providing some depth for Russia's southern borders.

The past few years have seen an escalating struggle, as mentioned above, between competing ideologies in this region. The bulk of Ukrainians aspire to join the European Union whilst Russia has been endeavouring, even by coercive methods, to keep Ukraine in its area of influence. Russia does not welcome the prospects of its neighbours slipping too much towards the West! The inevitable thus fructified with a bloody conflict ensuing in March 2014 between Ukraine and Russia. The West, including the US, have accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of old style Soviet imperialism by triggering violent unrest in Ukraine and unabashedly supporting the rebels militarily against democratically elected Ukrainian governments.

To chastise Russia from its Ukrainian forays, stringent economic sanctions had been imposed by the US and European Union on the former in March 2014 onwards when the Russians had seized Crimea and Sevastopol. Notwithstanding Russia's currently grave economic state, attributable also to sanctions from the West but primarily owing to sharp decline in global oil prices – oil being Russia's major revenue earner – Putin hardly appears to have changed his dogged strategy towards Ukraine.

A recent Wall Street Journal editorial pointed out that “ Putin has never stood down” – not in Chechnya in 1999, when he used the Chechen war to take power; not in Georgia in 2008; not in 2012, when he whipped up anti-Americanism and domestic repression to crush his own anti-government street protests; and so far not in Ukraine.³

Events Post March 2014

The current Russian-Ukrainian crisis assumed serious proportions in March 2014 with Russian forces invading Ukrainian territory and seizing Crimea and Sevastopol where the Russian Black Sea Fleet was harboured. Simultaneously with formidable Russian support, separatists in the eastern and south-eastern parts of Ukraine launched offensives to seize the predominantly ethnic Russian region of Ukraine which borders Russia. Currently, pro-Russian rebels, with covert support of the Russian Army, are attempting to seize the vital communication centre of Debaltsevo and also endeavouring to enlarge their footprint in the entire Donetsk-Luhansk regions of Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Ukraine government of Petro Poroshenko, who was elected President on a pro-West platform, replacing pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, also launched counter offensives against these rebels but his Army remains rather short of weaponry and ammunition to adequately tackle these pro-Russian separatists. Importantly, one of the reasons for the Russian actions in Crimea has been that former President Yanukovich had given 25 years extension with effect from 2010 for the Black Sea Fleet to remain in Crimea, whilst, the new government of President Poroshenko had proclaimed that this lease would not be extended beyond 2017.

It is pertinent to mention that earlier in Sep 2014 a cease-fire was negotiated in the Belarus city of Minsk. However, Ukraine has alleged that this cease-fire was grossly unsuccessful owing to mischief perpetrated by the Russians who have kept supplying lethal heavy weaponry to the rebels, and, covertly even units of the Russian Army have been fighting alongside these rebels in the eastern regions of Ukraine.

Cease-Fire Brokered by European Powers : 15 Feb 2015

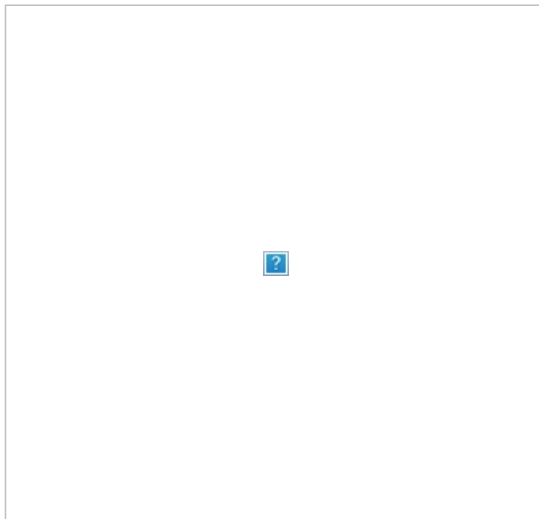
With near civil war conditions emerging and pro-Russian separatists achieving alarming successes in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, the US and European Union, once again, swung into action. While the US President Barack Obama has been vociferously advocating Russia to stop interference in Ukraine and has sent some trucks, clothing and food aid to the beleaguered Ukrainians, many US Congressmen have been clamouring for dispatch of heavy weapons, if not the US boots on the ground, for the Ukrainian Army. Most US analysts opine that if Ukraine can successfully defend its sovereignty whilst inflicting credible costs on the Russians and their sponsored rebels, Putin may learn that he is not as invincible as he imagines. However, as the London based journal, The Economist, has pithily observed that Russia's “economic woes do not seem to have altered Vladimir Putin's strategy..... his popularity rating remains over 80 per

cent.”⁴

With events in Ukraine threatening to spin out of control, German Chancellor Angela Dortehea Merkel and French President Francois Hollande met in early Feb 2015 at Minsk with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to explore a peaceful and acceptable solution to the Ukrainian conflict. It must be put on record that both the German and French heads of state have been in the forefront to resolve the Ukrainian crisis.

After prolonged negotiations going on for 16 continuous hours, a cease-fire was indeed brokered by Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande with the Ukrainian President and the largely unyielding President Putin, to take effect from 15 Feb 2015 onwards. Concerned with the adverse fall-out of this crisis, the UN Security Council immediately ratified the cease-fire agreement calling upon both Russia and Ukraine to sincerely implement the proposals arrived at with great difficulty. The situation emerging from the second cease-fire Agreement is shown in Map 2. The ground situation is quite fluid and is changing with every passing day.

The Battle Lines in Ukraine (Minsk II)



Source : Ukraine National Security & Defence Council
Map 2

The above-mentioned agreement, dubbed Minsk II, calls for an immediate and full cease-fire; importantly, withdrawal from the conflict zone of all heavy weapons especially missile systems and rockets like the Tornado, Urgan, Smerch and Tochka etc., release of all hostages and pardon to all those who participated in the current conflict. In addition, this agreement also calls for an early dialogue for the holding of local elections. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has been tasked to effectively monitor the implementation of the aforesaid ceasefire. However, most analysts do feel that like the earlier cease-fire in Sep 2014, largely attributable to Russian grand designs for Ukraine and the highly ambitious mindsets of their sponsored separatists, Minsk II is also doomed to failure! If that happens, it indeed would be a gross setback for regional peace. Meanwhile, Ukrainian President Poroshenko has since withdrawn his troops from embattled Debaltseve to prevent further casualties to his ill equipped forces. In addition, he has suggested a UN mandated peace-keeping force or a EU police mission to monitor the fragile cease-fire between his nation and Russian supported rebels. The

Minsk II Agreement also characterises Europe’s fear of not only Ukraine’s adverse political, military and economic condition but of the US and Russian rivalry, once again, being revived at its doorstep and thus has brought the German and French leaders to diffuse this crisis.

The USA and the Ukrainian Crisis

The Ukrainian crisis has brought back on the global stage the unchanging geopolitical mindset of the Cold War between the two earlier conflicting powers; namely, the US and Russia in the new avatar of the erstwhile Soviet Union. As Russia determinedly endeavours to keep Ukraine away from the EU and NATO not wishing the latter creeping close to its boundaries, the US desires Russia’s regional dominance to be kept limited leaving American allies of the European Union to assume both political and economic ascendancy in this part of the world. The latent mistrust of Russia in the US has evoked many strong reactions after the Ukrainian impasse. Some US think-tanks opine that this crisis is a manifestation of Putin’s “Novorossia” (New Russia) doctrine which has clear cut old Soviet Union hang-ups!

In a speech delivered to the US Senate, Senator Robert Portman had pompously proclaimed that “..... events in Ukraine are a direct challenge to the entire US led international order.”⁵ Very recently, the US Vice President Joe Biden had warned the Russians that “the costs to Russia will rise”⁶ if it continues to violate the ceasefire.

The US President is currently under strong pressure from many in his administration to supply heavy weapons to the Ukrainian Army to bolster its capabilities to effectively take on the Russian armed separatists who are currently using tanks, infantry combat vehicles, heavy rockets and missile systems supplied by Russia. Overall, relations between Russia and the US have dipped owing to their completely divergent national interests in the Ukrainian crisis. Some US geopolitical analysts also feel that close relations developing between Russia and China currently and Russia’s Ukraine forays could be seen as Russia’s answer to the US “pivot towards Asia.” Noted Russian analyst Lilia Shetsova has observed that “Today’s Russia is an advance combat unit of the new global authoritarianism, with China.... waiting

in the wings to seize its opportunities.” 7

Many Western analysts are of the opinion that Putin is assiduously working to bring the collapse and division of Ukraine and thus altering the existing post-Cold War world order. Meanwhile, the London based ‘Economist’ in its 14 Feb 2015 issue reports, that President Putin has alleged that America “wants to freeze the order established after the Soviet collapse and remain an absolute leader.” Many observers thus opine that Russia is not only fighting the Ukrainians but also the US in Ukraine! Nevertheless, hapless Ukraine must not become the new battleground for a reborn global rivalry between the West and Russia. That the latter, despite its current economic woes, is determinedly endeavouring to re-establish itself as a leading global player is more than apparent. It is well on the cards that President Putin may just use the Ukrainian template in the other erstwhile republics of the former Soviet Union in case he succeeds in his current Ukrainian foray. Thus a political equilibrium in Europe is the most important need of the hour.

India and Ukraine

Immediately at the break-up of the Soviet Union in December 1991, India had recognised Ukraine as a sovereign independent nation and by mid-1992 established diplomatic relations with them. Indo-Ukrainian relations have been gradually warming-up especially after the highly successful state visit of former Ukrainian President Yanukovich’s to India in 2012. Apart from the deepening of economic, educational, cultural ties both nations have signed many agreements on Cooperation in the Peaceful Use of Outer Space, Air Services, Defence Cooperation and Exchange of Technology, Nuclear and Radiation Protection – an area Ukraine is adept at and India can profitably utilise Ukrainian expertise for the Russian origin nuclear reactors it operates. The current trade between the two nations is around \$3.2 billion with Indian exports (mostly pharmaceuticals) around \$520 million and imports from Ukraine around \$2.6 billion. In addition, there are over 4000 Indian students studying at a few Ukrainian medical and technical universities.⁸

The current Ukrainian crisis has put India’s foreign policy choices towards Russia, Ukraine and the West under some strain for India has good relations with all these competing interests in this region. As the US, the EU and Ukraine will prefer India to be openly critical of Russian interventions in Ukraine, India has to be careful of not antagonising its old strategic partner, Russia, with which it continues to maintain deep links especially in defence, trade and nuclear matters. Though the present Modi government, after assuming power in India last year, has refrained from expressing its stance on the current Ukrainian crisis, one way or the other, the previous National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon had voiced the official Indian opinion last year.⁹ Menon had called Russian interests in Ukraine as “legitimate” – a remark which had not gone down well with the US and the EU. Even President Obama had indirectly alluded to the same while addressing a press conference in New Delhi at the end of his Jan 2015 visit to India. How successful India will be in its balancing act on Ukraine will be clear in the coming months! India can play a more proactive role and mediate between Russia and Ukraine – after all, nations aspiring to be of global reckoning must learn to make hard choices and act on principles of fair-play embellished with moral force. India could thus also impress upon the UN and other like-minded nations to strive much more zealously, than hitherto, for peace, democracy and stability in Ukraine.

Conclusion

As the contours of old Cold War rivalry loom threateningly on Europe’s geopolitical horizon and the West faces its most serious challenge from Russia, German Chancellor Merkel has very aptly summarised the feelings of most Europeans stating, “we want to shape this European order together with Russia and not against Russia.” Nevertheless, Ukraine, fighting to preserve its integrity as a nation, today stands at an immensely critical juncture in its destiny. Its successful existence, as a young nation-state, symbolises the sustainment of a world order based on the lofty principles enshrined in the charter of the United Nations. Whole-hearted support, both moral and material, of the global community is not only sine-qua-non for the survival of Ukraine but as a beacon for all small nations in preserving their hard-won independence and sovereignty in this unequal world.

Endnotes

1 Ukrainian casualty figures widely reported in the global media. Also in UN News Centre (carried online).

2 Statistics from the Wikipedia free encyclopedia.

3 President of National Endowment for Democracy, Carl Gershman in his keynote address to the Ukrainian American Bar Association on 15 Nov 2014 (published online on Jan 22, 2015).

4 Institute of Modern Russia report dated 23.12.2014, by Denis Volkov. US Senator Robert Portman’s speech to the US Senate (World Affairs Journal published online 21 Nov 2014).

5 Published BBC online (www.bbc.co.uk/news/18100123).

6 Ukraine’s Orange Blues (Alexander Motyl’s World Affairs blog published online as at serial 4).

7 Published online [mea.gov.in/Portal/Foreign Relations/Ukraine](http://mea.gov.in/Portal/Foreign%20Relations/Ukraine%20-%20Dec%202014.pdf) – Dec 2014.pdf.

8 Published in Russia and India Report; March 2014 edition, by Rajeev Sharma.

@Lieutenant General Kamleshwar Davar, PVSM, AVSM (Retd) was commissioned into the 7th Light Cavalry on 30 Jun 1963. He commanded a Corps in Punjab and retired as the first Director General Defence Intelligence Agency and Deputy Chief of the Integrated Defence Staff (Intelligence) on 31 Jan 2004.

