

Ukraine - an inevitable confrontation or avoidable conflict?

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(The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author)

The conflict in Ukraine begs many questions. To attempt answers requires a reconstruction of the elements and factors that make up the conflict; a kind of architecture that determines the character and substance. The elements can be defined as those aspects that are always present in any conflict; the factors may or may not be present. This is one method or approach to building a picture that will enable the identification of avenues in conflict management towards resolution¹. However, no robust and objective analysis leading to recommendations for approaches to resolution of a conflict is any good unless there is a willingness to reach a peace settlement by parties to that conflict; this requires acceptance and compromise by all sides.

History and Culture

In Ukraine, the element of history plays a significant role linked to the past and territorial ownership as well as ethnicity and language. One question relating to history is; 'has history been used as a viable reason to resort to conflict or as a convenient excuse?'

The culture that evolved over centuries and endured war and tyranny has been put aside in the name of nationalist ideology driven by personality. However, culture remains an important element despite this because it is undeniably a shared element between the two countries. Russia and Ukraine share a cultural history and the position of Kievan Rus is well known as a corner piece of Russian culture carrying with it the burden of history – emotion. As part of this cultural overlap religion has a passing importance; not just as a spiritual prop; but also as a propaganda tool and in a sense an absent player. 'Where were the patriarchs?' Here there was a brotherhood that could have maintained communication between the warring parties in the absence of any other channel. They still could mediate, with one limitation; the church in Russia is not independent of the State or the President.

In any event history as an element in conflict always evokes emotions that are likely to spill over into violence if they are manipulated. The aspect of sharing as a positive feature has diminished; a recent survey by the Razumkov Centre shows how opinion has become

¹ icra.www.uk.net

polarised between Russians and Ukrainians in the Donbass and Luhansk regions, and how trust has diminished². This is a critical observation as trust-building in the future is a crucial pre-requisite towards any resolution. The manipulation of people's thinking is detrimental to this process.

Actors; personalities and organised bodies

Manipulation in conflict is in the domain of personalities and other actors who seek to influence events in their selfish interests seeking to achieve personal ambition through the exercise of power and influence. The direct interests of a population often suffer from selfishness among actors.

In Ukraine, the territorial ambitions of a personality-led more powerful neighbour has been very much in evidence. The opportunity to achieve the long held ambition of Vladimir Putin to re-establish influence over historical Russian territory was enabled not just by careful preparation of that territory by Russian state elements, but by a corrupt and weak government in Kiev whose weakness was an enabler. The process was in some sense similar to the re-drawing of the southern Russian border with Georgia in 2008. There the ground was prepared over time; a weak and nationalistic government was bound to over-react to provocation and so Abkhazia and South Ossetia gained their idea of self-determination and some distorted idea of independence.

Other actors have also played a part in bringing about the crisis. The West, described here as NATO, the US and EU, has consistently irritated the Kremlin by ignoring the sensitivity of Russian elites in the post-Cold War era. It was self-evident that following the collapse of the Soviet Union there would be a plethora of newly-independent states struggling to emerge in the former soviet space that was governed from Moscow. This loss of territory was viewed as a kind of military defeat by the power structures ('siloviki') and a simmering determination to regain territory remained below the surface. On the face of it NATO remained the same organisation that had existed in the Cold War; 'why did it not disband or change into something else?' was the cry from the ministries in Moscow. The expansion in NATO membership taking members from the former Warsaw Pact countries and tempting others like Georgia and Ukraine to join the club was further 'provocation' that looked like an attempt to encircle Russia. Georgia's loudly spoken desire to join NATO (and the EU) contributed to a

² www.razumkov.org.ua

complete breakdown in relations with its neighbour and trading partner, and eventually to war in 2008. The hope in Tbilisi that the US and NATO might help evaporated and the weakness of the Cold War adversary was exposed to Moscow.

NATO consistently declared from the mid-90's that any State who could meet the criteria of membership had a right to join the alliance. This was a 'red rag to Moscow's bull'. At first the Kremlin acquiesced to the first tranche of expansion; but as the process continued the response from Moscow became stronger.

The NATO Russia Council (NRC) was the talking shop where joint projects could be discussed and disputes, including expansion, argued over. The impression for the Russians was that the NRC was a kind of second league organisation designed to make them feel good, but to deny them any influence. In the beginning there was enthusiasm and engagement; ideas like Theatre Missile Defence were first mooted by the Russian side in the NRC. This idea was argued against by the US and others who latterly installed their own version of missile defence in Europe without any Russian input. President Putin knew that a robust, possibly military, response by NATO was off the cards. The war weary alliance extracting itself from Afghanistan and facing new challenges in the Middle East had no stomach for more than a diplomatic response. The same thing had been seen during the Georgia crisis in 2008. But the rhetoric from NATO HQ remained strident. Finally, the Russian military representative was withdrawn in the middle of the crisis in Ukraine and another door shut in an atmosphere of growing violence.

Violence; physical, psychological and economic

In Ukraine, the element of violence has been used in certain ways by all parties.

Psychological violence has been as evident as physical violence; economic violence has also been used. The question here is 'what effect has each species of violence had on outcomes?'

Physical violence and the use of military force by the government fighting its own people, separatists and allies from across the border has caused considerable collateral damage including the downing of a Malaysian Airlines passenger jet – Flight MH17. The use of high end weapon systems of the type that was probably used comes with a price; the people using the systems are unregulated and not controlled by international norms yet their action proven or unproven caused a complete loss of any international support for their cause. The Ukrainian military too has caused collateral damage; but this has had a different outcome -

the loss of support from the population in the areas where fighting is taking place making political solutions more difficult to achieve.

Economics

The economic weapon has been employed in various ways. As winter approaches Russia pressurizes Kiev on the issue of unpaid gas bills. The European Union (EU) and US introduced economic sanctions on Russian business interests and individuals. Although the sanctions regime was a response to Russian actions against Ukraine, it was also the only 'weapon' available to the West that would have any impact in support of Kiev. The impact on the Russian economy has been significant and may have played a part in bringing about Russian agreement to a ceasefire and a separation of forces.

There is another angle to the economic element in the conflict which is of creeping significance and is linked to the aspirations of the Russian leadership to re-establish lost borders and therefore some national pride that was damaged at the end of the Cold War when the Soviet Russian economy was almost entirely contained within the borders of the Soviet Union; internal trade within the union was the dynamo; there was little in the way of trade outside the borders of soviet space; at least not in comparison with today's trade volumes that exit, enter and transit Russia from across the globe. It is this aspect of Russian planning in and around its perimeter when trying to 'recapture' its old area of influence that has seemingly been given too little attention by the Kremlin. The slowdown in global trade affecting Russia as a consequence of her actions has been at least as damaging to the national economy, which was already in decline, as EU sanctions.

The creation of the 'Customs Union' has yet to show its effect across the region. However, it is another aspect that demonstrates thinking in the Kremlin that has a direct impact on the conflict with Ukraine. Most analysts would argue that this new economic bloc has been created as a buffer against the EU. This is despite the obvious imbalance in economic potential of both organisations. So, here again we can see that even trade and economics are being used to serve the crucible of Russian pride being held in the hands of the leadership, rather than to serve the future economic prosperity of the country. For Ukraine, given its geographical position between the two economic blocs, the position is unenviable.

Clearly an association with the EU in normal conditions without risking a punitive response from its largest, culturally and historically closest neighbour would have been the best course.

But with the threat of punitive economic and military action, the choice for Kiev was almost impossible. Added to this dreadful conundrum was the expressed view of economists and others that it is not possible to 'belong' to two free trade blocs at once. Since the issue contributed to the motivation for the violence that ensued, perhaps this view should be re-visited in the light of subsequent events.

Geography; physical and human

Apart from Ukraine's position between Russia, the West, and the EU and the 'Customs Union' the geographical element in the conflict has presented some of the opportunities for those who seek to gain from it and also some of the impasses that make resolution difficult, including the economic tangle mentioned above and the legacy of history with its cultural overtones. The physical boundaries presented by rivers and the littoral are one issue.

The clear intention by Moscow to bring the Crimea within its domain and thus take the port facilities of the Black Sea Fleet under full control has also removed the issue of the Kerch Straits from the list of disagreements and contentious issues. But the seizure of Crimea has also weakened Ukraine by removing an economically important point of access to the Black Sea. In this context it is to be hoped that Odessa remains under Kiev's authority and that the country retains at least one significant port. The consequences of losing this facility and, effectively consigning Ukraine to the status of a landlocked country, would further weaken the State and the economy. *Should Moscow be considering further military actions along Ukraine's littoral, it should consider carefully the unintended effect this may have in terms of creating an economic area of instability on its western frontier; or maybe it does not care.*

Another geographical feature to be considered is the Dniepr river that creates a neat, or fairly neat, physical geographical boundary separating the Russian speaking areas in the east of the country from the heartland all the way down to the Black Sea; a tempting borderline for the military-minded separatists and allies. Certainly military-thinkers in Moscow will view the Dnepr as a natural boundary should one need to be drawn.

In the west, Moldova's unresolved 'frozen' conflict with its separatist region of Transnistria presents another potential pressure point on Ukraine to succumb to the aspirations of Russia. Like those east of the Dnepr the population in the separatist region is largely Russian-speaking and looks east rather than west. The presence of Russian troops and bases in the Transnistrian region allows Moscow to use the territory as a place to reinforce if it so wishes.

And the upcoming Moldovan elections are seemingly centred on the choice between the ‘Customs Union’ and greater association with the EU. All this resonates poorly with the crisis in Ukraine. *Should Moldova choose the ‘Customs Union’ how easy would it be for Kiev choose association with Europe in the future?*

The human geography of Ukraine is changing; there has been significant decline in the population. Government initiatives started in 2006 to reverse this trend that debilitated the economy exacerbated by rising wages and the global economic crisis, have been thrown into reverse by the conflict. A likely growth in the ageing population puts further pressure on the government³. In the context of the conflict in eastern Ukraine where pensions reportedly have been unable to be paid due to the violence and inability of the state to govern, the lack of care for the elderly and ageing resonates poorly for Kiev and plays to the tune of the separatists and their ally.

Migration over time by young people seeking a better life in the West is another debilitating factor repeated throughout much of Eastern Europe, including Moldova. The conflict-sensitive aspect to the demographic element is that it will make recovery from ‘war’ markedly more difficult for the country and will demand significant economic assistance from the outside.

Approaches towards resolution

It is hard to conceive of a resilient resolution process at this time. The fragile ceasefire is, like all ceasefires, temporary by definition. To allow the separation of forces agreement with accompanying ceasefire to be seen as some kind of conflict resolution would be to fall into the same trap as was seen in Georgia’s conflicts with its separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The processes there which were encapsulated respectively in the Moscow and Sochi Agreements were allowed to become some kind of way of life without any real progress.

The kind of agreements that were instituted in Georgia and are now being replicated in eastern Ukraine serve only as conflict management tools designed to keep violence in check while positive steps forward are designed, or while less well-intentioned parties draw breath. Without forward movement in conflict management the ceasefire is destined to collapse. Forward movement requires significant mediation and time leading to negotiation. To achieve

³ euromonitor.com/2012/05/ukraines-population-in-rapid-decline.html

this, it seems necessary that all the issues are on the table until significant trust has been built to allow some disarmament to take place; possibly to allow Russia to play a responsible role which may require a lifting or loosening of economic sanctions imposed by the EU; a lessening of anti-Russian rhetoric by NATO and some thinking on cooperation with Russia.

A critical problem is in the lack of forums where Russia can engage the West on these issues. In the past, having gone to the brink of conflict in the Cold War the military imbalances and threats in Europe were managed through treaty systems such as the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty. These mechanisms of control and transparency brought confidence and security to the region through well-tried and understood practices. Now the treaties have gone in all but name, leaving a vacuum in military dialogue and practice that is as dangerous as the numerical and technical imbalances themselves. And has been mentioned already, most recently as a reaction to recent events in Ukraine, the Russian representative to NATO, General Yevnevich, was withdrawn closing yet another avenue for dialogue⁴.

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) seems the only viable regional multi-national organisation with any possibility of constructing a dialogue between parties. Yet the poor relationship that Russia currently has with OSCE as a member does not bode well for this to work and the Black Sea region is becoming increasingly militarized.

Back to the future, or looking forward?

Has the crisis been ‘an inevitable confrontation or was it an avoidable conflict?’ Hindsight could highlight many ways the conflict might have been avoided. There is no way of knowing if a more balanced relationship between the West and Russia could have prevented the outbreak of violence, seizure of territory, manipulation and general debacle. A debacle seemingly brought about in the name of personal ambition and fuelled by anger at an arrogant but militarily weaker West that is war weary from bruising conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The likelihood of economic sanctions somehow forcing the Russian leadership to forget its ambitions seems slim. There is a visible riposte by Moscow using the ‘energy weapon’ to retaliate. Gas supplies to Ukraine are interrupted and verbal threats are being made to Europe concerning the possible interruption to Russian energy supplies going west through Eastern Europe. Logic would suggest that the damage to the Russian economy, already depressed, by

⁴ Trans-Atlantic Partnerships and the South Caucasus: A Strategic Approach to Regional Security. The Conference Materials. Yerevan: Center for Strategic Analysis, 2014. *Militarization in the Caucasus and Wider region*; pp 105-113; and 125-135.

sanctions and the loss of revenue from its western market could force the issue; but pride and national ambition are powerful drivers – possibly more powerful than economic prosperity.

Ukraine is the unfortunate casualty in both the economic game and the game of personal ambition versus western arrogance. She can only hope that the character of the game that is being played over her head changes its tragic course towards more confrontation, and less engagement. The requirement for the parties to adopt a greater sense of responsibility without personal ambition and to reduce damaging rhetoric is vital. If not, the conflict has the potential to spread, and the World could return to its Cold War past and Russia's inevitable economic decline will worsen.

Against this pessimistic background there is now an urgency to take hard steps. The Ukrainian government can consider its position and possibly accept that the Crimea is now part of Russia. Political negotiation over eastern Ukraine requires major compromise and significant trust-building measures that going as far as 'truth and reconciliation', should at least be discussed.

For its part the Russian government has at some point to recognise that the path the conflict is taking is not in its own long-term interest. And the West perhaps needs to consider how a qualitatively better dialogue with Moscow without loud rhetoric can be developed; this may mean negotiation over sanctions. It may mean standing back from further ambitions for NATO expansion.