

UKRAINE AND THE NEW DIVIDE

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The political crisis that erupted in Ukraine in early 2014 has ended the period in Russian-Western relations that began with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.¹ The crisis marks the end of a generally cooperative phase in those relations, which even included a failed effort at Russia's integration with or into the West on its own terms. Instead, the Ukraine crisis has opened a new period of heightened rivalry, even confrontation, between former Cold War adversaries.

On the face of it, this new period is broadly reminiscent of the Cold War, but it differs from it in important ways. Today's situation has a values component to it but is not nearly as focused on ideology as the conflict between communism and liberal democracy was. It has a traditional military dimension too, but this aspect is not—as yet—dominant. The current crisis has global implications, but, in and of itself, it is not central to the global system. Most importantly, unlike the Cold War, the present crisis is not the organizing principle of either world politics or even the foreign policies of the conflict's main contestants, particularly that of the United States. If historical analogies are of any use, parallels to the nineteenth-century Great Game for supremacy between the Russian and British Empires would be more to the point, except, of course, that the present U.S.-Russian rivalry is asymmetrical.

The severity of the crisis came as a surprise to many, in Ukraine itself, Russia, the European Union (EU), and

the United States. Not that the gestation of the crisis and the steadily worsening environment in Russia's relations with the West had been overlooked. Rather, many Ukraine watchers who continued to believe that “the more the country changes, the more it stays the same” were caught off guard by the dynamics on the ground. In late February 2014, Ukraine moved too far and too abruptly to the West and lost balance. Just before that, U.S. policy in support of democratic change in Ukraine had steered past safe limits. Russia felt cornered, and its reaction surprised many Russians, not to speak of Ukrainians and Westerners.

This new battle for influence is very real and will have major ramifications beyond just Ukraine. The confrontation will take some time to lead to an outcome, and neither the time frame nor the result can be clearly foreseen at this point. What is clear, however, is that the Euro-Atlantic region has entered a different epoch.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, chairs the research council and the Foreign and Security Policy Program.

ORIGINS OF THE UKRAINE CRISIS

The Ukraine crisis was immediately preceded by competition between the EU and Russia for the future geoeconomic orientation of Ukraine. The roots of the crisis lie in the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, which ended the prospect of enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for both Georgia and Ukraine, and in the beginning of the global financial crisis, which seemed to give more credence to regional economic arrangements. Then, the EU and Russia drew different conclusions from the war and the crisis. The Europeans, through the Eastern Partnership program the EU launched in 2009, looked to associate Ukraine, along with five other former Soviet republics,² economically and politically with the EU. Rather than a step toward future EU enlargement, however, this initiative was an attempt to constitute a “zone of comfort” to the East of the union’s border and enhance these countries’ Western orientation.

The Russian Federation, for its part, tried to attract Ukraine and most of the rest of the former Soviet Union to its flagship project of a customs union, also energized in 2009, which by May 2014 led to the signing of the treaty establishing a Eurasian Economic Union.³ Rather than re-creating the Soviet Union, as suspected in the West, Moscow began building a Russian-led community in Eurasia that would give Russia certain economic benefits and, no less important, better bargaining positions with regard to the country’s big continental neighbors—the EU to the west and China to the east. Including Ukraine into the scheme, which Russian President Vladimir Putin had been trying to achieve since the 2003–2004 project of a “single economic space,” was designed to give the new compact the critical mass of 200 million consumers, of which Ukraine would supply almost a quarter. Yet at the same time, Putin remained wedded to his master concept of a “Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok,” which he first outlined in 2010 and has reiterated since.

Thus, Brussels and Moscow each saw Ukraine as an important element of their own geopolitical project. The Russians have also made an effort to explore the possibility of associating Ukraine with both economic units and thus keeping

the country’s international and domestic balance. Yet, for the Europeans there was no question of talking to a third country about Ukraine’s association. Eventually, both Russia and the EU came to see Ukraine’s choice as a zero-sum game and worked hard to influence the outcome.

Ukraine itself, ruled from 2010 to 2014 by then president Viktor Yanukovich and his supporters from the eastern region of Donetsk, was habitually maneuvering between the EU and Russia, always in search of a better deal. Yanukovich, for domestic political reasons, raised high hopes for the EU link, on which he was ostensibly working. However, the Ukrainian president was never able to secure reasonable financial relief from Brussels to compensate for the severe blow to Ukrainian industry that would have resulted from closer economic association with the EU. In the run-up to presidential election originally scheduled for early 2015, the need for such a cushion became crucial.

At the same time, Yanukovich had to factor in the pressure exercised by Russia. Moscow first showed Ukraine, in the form of trade barriers, what it would lose from choosing the EU over Russia and, later, in the form of an aid package, what it would gain if it made the “right” choice. As a result, in November 2013 Yanukovich suddenly suspended a political and economic association agreement that Kiev had been due to sign with the EU. The following month, he instead accepted a generous financial and economic package from Russia’s Putin.

The November 2013 decision led to mass protests in central Kiev, which almost immediately turned into a permanent standoff on the capital’s Independence Square. Most protesters were ordinary people who suffered from poverty and were deeply incensed by runaway official corruption, including in Yanukovich’s family. To those people, EU association appeared as a way out of this undignified situation, and the abrupt and unexpected closure of that door produced a painful and powerful shock.

This essentially civic protest, which became known as the Maidan, was joined by nationalist groups, hailing mainly

from western Ukraine, who always insisted on a Ukrainian national identity that was clearly separate from, and even inimical to Russia. To them, Yanukovich, an easterner, was hijacking the country to merge with Russia, which many in the country's west viewed with deep suspicion and outright hostility. Finally, the Maidan protests were supported, funded, and exploited by Ukraine's oligarchic clans, which were unhappy with Yanukovich and his Donetsk allies wielding too much power and aggressively expanding their business interests at other oligarchs' expense. To them, the Maidan was a means to force an early presidential election and unseat Yanukovich.

In the United States, the top echelons in the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama were not initially focused on the Ukrainian developments. Ukraine was not a foreign policy priority for the U.S. president, who was heavily preoccupied with wars and revolutions in the Middle East, Iran's nuclear program, the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, America's relations with China, and developments in East Asia. However, the United States had long supported pro-Western democratic movements in Ukraine, for both ideological and geopolitical reasons, and it looked with a wary eye on the Kremlin's attempts at Eurasian integration. Washington abhorred the idea of Ukraine becoming part of the Russian sphere of influence. To stymie that, it was working on helping pro-Western opposition leaders hold on to power in Kiev and openly encouraging them in their efforts.

In mid-February 2014, the situation in central Kiev degenerated into violence and reached a denouement. It first appeared that Yanukovich was resolved to win by using force to disperse the Maidan, which by that time had formed a capable fighting force built around a nationalist organization called the Right Sector. However, Yanukovich stopped the police advance in its tracks and opened talks with the opposition leaders. Those talks soon became negotiations about the concessions his government was prepared to make and ended on February 21, 2014, with the president's de facto capitulation, which was to be delayed by a few months. The foreign ministers of EU member states France, Germany, and Poland co-signed an agreement with the Ukrainian

government and opposition leaders to that effect. No sooner had it been signed than the deal was rejected by the Maidan, whose more radical members demanded the president's immediate resignation. Yanukovich fled from Kiev, the police disappeared from its streets, and the Maidan revolution could celebrate victory.

RUSSIA'S POLICIES

These dramatic developments were most traumatic for Moscow. From a Russian perspective, Ukraine had for two decades been a weak, fragile, and often unreliable state, chronically creating problems for Russian energy giant Gazprom's transit to Europe. However, to most Russians, the country was anything but foreign. Now, Ukraine was suddenly turning into a country led by a coalition of pro-Western elites in Kiev and anti-Russian western Ukrainian nationalists. This shift, in the Kremlin's eyes, carried a dual danger of Kiev clamping down on the Russian language, culture, and identity inside Ukraine and of the country itself joining NATO in short order. Putin reacted immediately by apparently putting in motion contingency plans that Moscow had drafted for the eventuality of Kiev seeking membership in the Atlantic alliance.

Russia's Ukraine policy, which until then had been publicly low-key and heavily focused on top-level interaction with the Ukrainian president, immediately went into high gear. Defense and maneuvering stopped, to be replaced by a counteroffensive. The main goal became to keep Ukraine from joining NATO and, ideally, to win back the country for the Eurasian integration project, the core element of which is the reunification of what Moscow sees as the "Russian world." In pursuing its new, proactive approach, Russia had two main objectives.

The first was to make Crimea off limits to the new post-Yanukovich authorities in Kiev. This was executed by means of Russian special forces physically insulating the peninsula from mainland Ukraine, neutralizing the Ukrainian garrison in Crimea, and helping Crimea's pro-Russian elements take control of the local government, parliament, and law

enforcement agencies. Russia also encouraged those elements to hold a referendum on Crimea's status and pursued an all-out campaign in favor of Crimea's reunification with Russia. The vote, held on March 16, 2014, overwhelmingly endorsed such a union. Two days later, a treaty was signed in Moscow to incorporate Crimea and the city of Sevastopol into Russia.

Moscow's second objective was to achieve a new federal settlement in Ukraine, which would forestall complete domination of the country by Kiev and western Ukraine and thus make any move toward NATO structurally impossible. On March 1, 2014, Putin had already sought and received powers from the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament, to use Russian armed forces inside Ukraine. Russian forces began exercising along the Ukrainian border, appearing ready to invade, but no crossborder invasion happened. The Kremlin was putting pressure on the new authorities in Kiev, making them nervous and indecisive; deterring Washington and Brussels from intervening by dramatically raising the stakes; and encouraging Moscow's political friends in the Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine.

Indeed, in the largely Russophone eastern and southern Ukraine, mass rallies began to demand regional autonomy, including rights for the Russian language. These rallies were later followed by reasonably well-organized militant groups seizing government buildings, arming themselves, and taking over towns. In the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, the militants held regional referendums and proclaimed their own "republics" independent from Kiev. Moscow did not hide its sympathy and support for these separatists, but it refrained from either recognizing them or sending the Russian forces to protect them.

However, Russia failed in rousing resistance to Kiev across the entire southeast of Ukraine. The hope that predominantly Russian-speaking Novorossia, "New Russia," encompassing Ukraine's entire southeast, would break away from the new revolutionary authorities and form a federation did not materialize. The key cities of Dnepropetrovsk, Kharkov, Kherson, Nikolayev, Odessa, and Zaporozhye remained under

the central government's control. Moreover, the interim government launched an "antiterrorist operation" in Donetsk and Luhansk, which led to numerous casualties on both sides, and provoked a humanitarian crisis, but did not result in a Russian military intervention.

Moscow refused to recognize the Maidan-backed government, even though it dealt with its officials. The United States, for its part, gave well-publicized political support to Kiev, as evidenced by the visits there by Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State John Kerry, Central Intelligence Agency Director John Brennan, and a number of other U.S. officials. Russian media claimed that Washington was directing the Ukrainian authorities' actions.

On May 25, 2014, Ukraine successfully held an early presidential election that led to the clear victory of Petro Poroshenko, an oligarch and the principal sponsor of the Maidan.

THE WESTERN RESPONSE

Within a few weeks, measures taken in response to Russia's actions abruptly reversed the twenty-five-year-old trend toward expanding contacts between former Cold War adversaries. Moscow's policies met with a strong negative reaction from the United States and its allies. Seen as an aggressor, Russia was effectively expelled from the G8 group of leading industrialized nations, which returned to being the G7. The EU downgraded its relations with Russia, while NATO froze its cooperation with Moscow. Western leaders suspended their bilateral summits with Putin. In a United Nations (UN) General Assembly vote on the Crimean referendum, 100 nations refused to recognize the outcome, against only eleven that did.⁴ Faced with near-universal condemnation, Russian delegates had to suspend their participation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Russia's accession process to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) was also put on hold.

In material terms, the United States led its allies in imposing sanctions against Russian officials, companies, and potentially whole sectors of industry. The goal is to hurt Russia so

much that it backs down on Ukraine, ideally creating enough pain within Russia to effect a regime change—that is, Putin's ouster. Successive waves of sanctions, in conjunction with efforts to isolate Russia politically, immediately caused a deep plunge of the Russian stock market, a massive capital flight out of Russia, and a further weakening of the ruble. Even though the energy relationship between Russia and Europe is too vital to many EU economies for it to be wound down immediately, there is now a much stronger trend toward energy diversification away from Russia. Russian finance was also put on notice about the potential dire consequences of a deepening confrontation with the United States.

In military terms, Russia has been redesignated as an adversary of the West. NATO is becoming reenergized around its original late-1940s mission of “keeping the Russians out.” The temporary deployments of relatively small Western contingents in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states are likely to turn into a permanent basing of NATO's forces—including U.S. troops—along the alliance's eastern border. NATO's ballistic missile defenses, which are now being installed in Europe, will be openly targeting Russia's nuclear forces. Neutral countries such as Sweden and Finland are considering joining NATO and would be welcome there should they decide to pursue membership. A major NATO summit in September 2014 in Wales is thus likely to present a “new old face” of the alliance to Europe and Russia.

In political, economic, and military terms, the European continent is again divided—with Russia to the east, NATO and the EU to the west, and the “lands in between” of Ukraine, Moldova, and the countries of the South Caucasus as the battleground. Great-power war in Europe, thought to be safely consigned to the history books since the start of the 1990s, has made a stunning comeback as a possibility. Economic sanctions, a political equivalent of war, have again been applied. Information warfare has been in full swing. Even though Russia and the United States had a close brush with confrontation in 2008 in Georgia, that episode was brief and left few traces. Georgia did not change post-Cold War history. Ukraine did.

Russia is openly challenging the U.S.-dominated order, having seen its own vital security interests challenged by U.S.-friendly forces in Ukraine. Moscow will not back off on issues of principle, and Washington cannot be expected to recognize Russia's sphere of influence in Ukraine and elsewhere in Eurasia. The United States will also refuse to treat Russia as an equal. Most importantly, the elements of trust that existed in U.S.-Russian relations in the 1990s and that reemerged briefly in the 2000s have been fundamentally shattered. The relationship has become essentially adversarial, as in the days of the Cold War or the Great Game.

Unlike in 2008 in the South Caucasus, the current conflict will not be a bump in the road that will soon lead to a new reset. Russian President Vladimir Putin has scored a huge success by returning Crimea to Russia, simultaneously creating a major obstacle to future accommodation not only with Ukraine but also with the United States and Europe. No lasting settlement will be possible without resolving the Crimea issue. Bracketing off Crimea from consideration in the relations between Russia and the West—unlike the successful bracketing off of Abkhazia and South Ossetia during the 2009 reset of U.S.-Russian relations—is unlikely.

The Ukrainian situation, despite the country's May 2014 presidential election, is far from stable and has a potential for social unrest, political upheaval, and territorial fragmentation. Donbas, an industrial area that includes two oblasts in eastern Ukraine, has turned into a battlefield where militias supported by Russia are fighting against Kiev's military forces. The downing on July 17, 2014, of a Malaysian passenger jet with about 300 people, most of them Dutch, has catapulted the local armed conflict onto a new, more dangerous level. It will be years before Ukraine acquires a modicum of stability. Russia's tactics with regard to the country will change, but the goal will remain: at minimum, to keep Ukraine neutral ground between Russia to the east and the EU and NATO to the west. Such neutrality, however, may have an insufficient number of supporters in Ukraine itself and may be hard to maintain. Ideally, Russia would want Ukraine, which it sees as belonging to the same Orthodox Christian/

Eastern Slavic civilization, to join its Eurasian union. More conflicts in Ukraine will stoke U.S.-Russian confrontation. To reassure Eastern European allies, Obama has initiated a series of measures to restore a “holding line” against Russia in Europe along the eastern borders of the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania. Sandwiched between these countries and Russia, however, will be Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. These states will be the battleground in the U.S.-Russian fight for influence that will be the essence of the new Great Game. A number of other countries, including Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Russian North Caucasus, and the Baltic states themselves, may also be affected by this competition. It will be some time before the geopolitical status and orientation of the post-Soviet states is finally settled.

The U.S.-Russian conflict feeds into the global system, where great-power tensions are on the increase. In particular, the confrontation may affect Sino-U.S. relations by creating a highly uneven United States-China-Russia triangle in which China, rather than the United States, will be the central player. Since the early 1990s, Western analysts have been routinely dismissing any significant impact of a Sino-Russian rapprochement on U.S. interests, pointing to Russia’s evident weakness and its purported fear of China. In the late 2010s, with Russia engaged in a confrontation with the United States and more distant from Europe than before, Moscow may grow more dependent on Beijing and become a more pliant partner of it. Besides China, Russia will be reaching out to other non-Western players to diminish U.S. global power and influence.

Even if the Western sanctions regime imposed on Russia is not too strict, it will not be lifted soon either, marring the relationship with the United States for a long time. The sanctions will create an atmosphere in Russia of a country under constant U.S. pressure. This will stimulate Russian patriotism and nationalism focused on the United States as an external adversary. More sanctions will probably only enhance this feeling and aid the government’s mobilization efforts. For the United States and some of its allies, Russia, on the contrary, will embody all the wickedness of the former

Communist regime, and worse. The trust needed to start moving toward accommodation and building a new relationship will be unavailable on either side. When and how the U.S.-Russian conflict will end is impossible to predict.

NOTES

¹ The term “Ukraine crisis” is used here to refer to the international relations phenomenon, which is also described as a “crisis over Ukraine.” This is in contrast to the term “Ukrainian crisis,” which is centered on the domestic developments in that country.

² Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova.

³ Under a treaty signed in May 2014, the Eurasian Economic Union of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus will be launched on January 1, 2015, if the treaty is ratified by the three countries’ parliaments. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are also on the way to joining the new union.

⁴ UN General Assembly, “Voting Record on Draft Resolution A/68/L.39 Territorial Integrity of Ukraine,” March 27, 2014, <https://papersmart.unmeetings.org/media2/2498292/voting-record.pdf>.

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