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RUSSIA-UKRAINE TENSIONS OVER CRIMEA- ONCE AGAIN

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The US Presidential election campaigns for November 2016 and terror attacks in France, Belgium and Germany this year dominated much of the media coverage. The ongoing crisis in Ukraine on the other hand was pushed to a frozen conflict metaphor and avoided media attention. However, the 10 August 2016 incident in Crimea not only brought the issue back in the limelight, but also serves as a grim reminder of how easily the relations between Russia and Ukraine can turn from bad to worst. The flare-up is the outcome of a decision by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to maintain the highest level of combat readiness, following Russian accusation of militant attacks to critical infrastructures near the city of Armyansk, Crimea.¹ Although the Ukrainian President has refuted the claims and targeted Russia for being hostile towards its neighbors with the threat of using military force, what is worth noting is the lack of confidence or the will to restore any sort of normalcy between the two political adversaries.

Since February 2014, Russia has control over the Crimean peninsula and has maintained a heavy military presence in the region. The strategic value of the peninsula emanates from the fact that it is the only warm water port facility that provides Russia with direct military access into the Black Sea. Stationing of military personnel along the Russia-Ukraine border area by both the countries is not a new phenomenon. The Ukrainian side blamed Russia for flaring up conflict since November 2013 in the Donbass region. Similarly, the Russian side too has blamed the Ukrainian government for not adhering to the principles of the Minsk II agreement signed in February 2015 and in the current incident for carrying out possible terror attacks in Crimea. In fact, it is not the first time that the Russian side has blamed the Ukrainian authorities for carrying out such attacks. In November 2015, anti-Russian vandals blew up major electrical transmission towers in Ukraine's Kherson region, cutting power to almost 2 million people amid escalating tensions around the Black Sea peninsula.²



Going past the rhetoric, it is important to question the reason behind the actions of Russia and Ukraine, given the fact that both the countries are marred by their own growing economic and political difficulties. The official Russian statement on the entire developing situation blames the attacks were planned, *'by the Ukrainian Defense Ministry's Chief Intelligence Directorate, targeting critical infrastructure and facilities in Crimea with the view of destabilizing the socio-political situation in the region in the run-up to federal and regional elections'*.³

If Russia's claim is to be believed that Kiev is involved in anti-Russian forces in Crimea, then Ukraine could be on the verge of committing a big political mistake. Retaking Crimea from Russia using military force would not only be impossible, but would also risk the possibility of a war.⁴ In this context, the key question is, can Ukraine afford to have a war with Russia for Crimea especially at the time when the European integration is facing economic challenges following the Brexit, security breach and refugee crisis— something that the authorities in Kiev need to think about? Moreover, the West should also realize that the weapon of sanctions though has caused significant damage to the Russian economy has not hindered Moscow for achieving its geopolitical interest wherever it deems necessary.

For Russia, holding President Poroshenko (a pro-Western leader) responsible for

promoting anti-Russia terrorist groups may work in its favour of gaining the confidence of international community. However, beyond its involvement of supporting pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine, what is Russia actually going to get from flaring up tensions in Crimea continues to be ambiguous. Furthermore, the Kremlin has been working with the West to come up with some workable solution for Syria but by flaring up tension in its own backyard, Russia may be risking the possibility of a composite dialogue with the West over the situation in Ukraine.

The entire episode also questions the credibility of the implementation and adherence to the Minsk II agreement. Nevertheless, to understand why the Minsk II agreement is proving ineffective in ending hostility, one need to understand the circumstance in which it was signed. As Xavier Moreau, editor at Stratpol, puts it, *"President Poroshenko signed up to Minsk II because he had no choice. He wanted to save his army in Debaltseve, because there was a lot of ammunition and people there, because it was a very strategic place for him. But he never had the intention of implementing the Minsk agreement. That was clear, the day when the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Klimkin came back to parliament, and said that giving autonomy to DNR and LNR was just advice and not an obligation"*.⁵

Several months have passed since the adoption of the Minsk II agreement, but no concrete measures have been taken by both sides

to end tensions in eastern Ukraine. One of the biggest problems for the Poroshenko government against the implementation of the agreement is the order of local self-governance especially in Donetsk and Lugansk, which would further set the scene for local elections in these disputed territories. Another hindering factor is the provision for an amnesty regarding crimes committed during the pro-Russian unrest in the Donbass region, which many nationalist groups in Ukraine simply don't agree with.⁶

Further, pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine and authorities in Moscow are not in favor of article nine of the agreement which calls for full control of the Ukrainian government over the state border throughout the conflict zone.⁷ For Russia, this article in particular is problematic as it would impede its support to the pro-Russian rebels in Donbass region. The lack of political will by both the countries is what is making the Minsk agreement a blunt tool.

The developments in Crimea may assist both Ukraine and Russia to think about their options before they work on a decisive plan of action. Russia has invested a lot of political capital in tackling several global issues, such as restoring peace in Syria and combating ISIS. Recalculating on its policy measures especially towards Ukraine and West should be among its top priorities. Finally, the focus for Russia should be more on reviving its economy rather than flaring up tensions with its neighbor country.

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(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Sheena McKenzie, "Ukraine troops on high alert amid growing tension with Russia", *CNN*, 11 August 2016, see <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/11/europe/ukraine-high-alert-russia-crimea/#>, accessed on 12 August 2016.

² Jack Losh, "Anti-Russian Saboteurs Plunge Crimea into Darkness by Blowing up Electrical Towers", *Vice News*, 22 November 2015, see <https://news.vice.com/article/anti-russian-saboteurs-plunge-crimea-into-darkness-by-blowing-up-electrical-towers>, accessed on 13 August 13, 2016.

³ "Statement by the Foreign Ministry of Russia on terror attacks in Crimea", *Foreign Ministry of Russia*, 11 August 2016, see <http://thesaker.is/statement-by-the-foreign-ministry-of-russia-on-terror-attacks-in-crimea/#>, accessed on 15 August 2016.

⁴ "The crisis over Crimea", *The Hindu*, 13 August 2016, see <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/editorial-putin-and-ukraike-the-crisis-over-crimea/article8981802.ece>, accessed on 15 August 2016.

⁵ John Harrison, "Is the Minsk II Agreement Dead?", *Sputnik News*, 11 August 2016, see http://sputniknews.com/radio_level_talk/20160811/1044170540/minsk-agreement-dead.html, accessed on 15 August 2016.

⁶ Bryan Macdonald, "The Minsk agreement and the reasons for current Russia-Ukraine tensions", *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, 12 August 2016, see https://rbth.com/opinion/2016/08/12/the-minsk-agreement-and-the-reasons-for-current-russia-ukraine-tensions_620637, accessed on 15 August 2016.

⁷ "Ukraine ceasefire: New Minsk agreement key points", *BBC*, 12 August 2016, see <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31436513#>, accessed on 15 August 2016.