



Centre for Air Power Studies

NATO AND THE UKRAINE CRISIS – WHODUNIT?

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Is the Crimean Crisis that has morphed into the Ukraine Crisis, really a consequence of Russian follies? Or is it because the West is forcing its own ideas on the region, something it has done often, across the globe? [An earlier article](#) had highlighted pertinent issues of the Crimean Crisis with specific reference to NATO expansion. This article would be an expansion of similar thought.

There is no denying the fact that a pro Russia Crimea and Ukraine would benefit the Russians greatly. This benefit could be viewed as military as well as economic, not to speak of ethno-social advantages. The argument that Russia would be intent on **returning back to its erstwhile glory** by virtue of getting back into its fold territories that had splintered away, may also to a large extent stand the test of time. However, this is generally true and any great power may want to do the same. Therefore laying the blame squarely on Russia alone may appear to be a little harsh.

Should we look at the issue from the Russian point of view, different possibilities emerge. Ever since the Cold War, Russia has watched NATO expansion, with the alliance moving further and further eastward and coming closer to the Russian doorstep. While the enlargement was justified under the pretext of **stabilizing the Russian borders for Russia itself**, this was only the western point of view! What about Russian security concerns? Any nation state would want to keep its heartland defended and its **geographical extremities** therefore provide the required buffer and offer **depth in**

defence. It would only be right to assume that though the federation broke up into many **new fledgling states on the periphery**, Russia continued to view these as an extension and also as a buffer against any potential threat. Therefore, NATO expansion eastward has always been viewed from a '**security threat**' perspective by Russia. After all, states do draw their own red lines and must be expected to respond when these are breached. Therefore, the NATO expansion plans to include Georgia and Ukraine were considered to be crossing the red line.

To add to the military threat parameter, let us consider two other issues. The EU put forth the Eastern Partnership Initiative, an **economic drive** to integrate more and more East European nations into the EU economy. Secondly, there have been efforts to continuously fund pro western organizations and individuals in Ukraine with an aim to **influence civil society and democratic institutions**¹. When, in addition to the NATO expansion plans, we look at the economic aspect of EU's expansion in the east and the political parameter of encouraging pro - democracy movements in the region, we have what could be termed as a '**complete package**'. To speak plainly, it would appear that Ukraine was being converted into a **fortified Western bulwark**.

In such a condition, it was only logical to expect a Russian response which first came in the form of the invasion of Georgia. Russia ensured that Georgia remained divided, the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were taken under Russian control and as a consequence Georgia was kept out of NATO. This warning signal however **was unheeded and NATO continued onwards**, resulting in Albania and Croatia becoming members. It therefore may not be entirely wrong to say that Russia was pushed to react the way it did when post Feb 2014, Russian forces moved in to wrest Crimea away from Ukraine.²

Would there be attempts to actually create a greater Russia? This is the argument on which western actions hinge. After all, if NATO expansion could be viewed as a threat to Russia, so would **Russian attempts to re unite Ukraine** and some other states be looked upon as a **threat to the western world** and hence the argument to stem this "Russian expansionist attempt" by admitting Ukraine and Georgia into the NATO fold. However, had that been the case, the indications would have been seen much before, and not purely as a

response to a crisis. Secondly, Russia may currently not be willing to physically annex a large nation like Ukraine and pay the attendant high cost that would further weaken its economy. Also, previous experiences in Afghanistan, Vietnam, Iraq and Chechnya do tend to remind one that such military actions do not end well.³

A Point Of View

What if the whole situation is looked at differently! Discard the western expansion theory and the Russian security concern theory and treat Ukraine as a sovereign state. Provide an **economic roadmap** that is promoted both by the EU as well as Russia and neutral agencies like the IMF. Chart out a course of action for stabilizing the situation with both the **EU and Russia being active partners**. A stable Ukraine would mean well for the East as well as the West. For this however, NATO must openly **denounce its expansion plans**, something that does not appear to be just round the corner. The greatest stumbling block would be the apparent loss of face for the US, should there be a **turnaround in the Ukraine policy** at this stage. Also, Russia would need to shelve its own plans for **retaining strategic military control** as well as playing with **energy concerns in the region**.

Another solution could be to allow Ukraine choose its own ally. However, such an arrangement may not work out when **great powers play for stakes**. The US did not think kindly when Cuba wanted to form a military alliance with Russia. And now when Ukraine wants to join the West, Russia plays the spoilsport. Therefore, choices of foreign policy need to be taken very carefully.

So the foremost question is this – what is the **significance of incorporating Ukraine** into NATO? Is it still a check on Russian expansion? A counterbalance to the rise of Russia, in view of the analysis that Russia still remains an enemy that would grow stronger with time? If so, then NATO should be willing to use military force as a solution which does not appear to be the case. At this point in time, it may be unlikely that the West would use force against Russian advances in the region. In fact, the Russian military action itself

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appears to have been a surprise. It is a possibility that the promoters and articulators of NATO expansion did not think it probable that NATO would actually have to militarily defend all its allies. The *rapid expansion* of the organization and the vast *differences in contributory capacities* of its member nations might be considered as a corroborating statement and a pointer in a similar direction⁴. Therefore, greater stress would be on economic sanctions, augmented in part by NATO expansion plans, to persuade Russia to stay away. However, in light of the recent Russian response, any further overture in admitting Ukraine into NATO's fold may prove disastrous for both sides. There is urgent need to diffuse the situation!

Continuing on the chosen path would definitely make relations with Russia that much more bitter. With the current status of geo politics in Afghanistan, Iran and Syria, it would need **more than a few heads to restore** the situation in the Middle East and Central Asia. This is where Russian influence could prove to be critical. The West could continue down the path already taken, with all players eventually coming out short. Alternately, a **rethink on a sovereign and neutral Ukraine** could be worked upon and everybody wins. The onus appears to be on the US and its allies.

(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])

End Notes

¹ <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/>

² <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/>

³ <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/>

⁴ <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30150.pdf>