

## Crimean crisis: A New Phase of Cold War?

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The referendum in Crimea on 16<sup>th</sup> March gave a 97 percent support in favour of joining Russia. The Western countries have held the referendum to be illegal. Undeterred, on 19<sup>th</sup> March, Russia signed a treaty with Crimea formalising the incorporation thus reversing the 1954 transfer of Crimea to Ukraine.

These developments have escalated tensions between Russia and the West to a level not seen since 1991. Russia has been suspended from the G8. The US and EU have also imposed sanctions against a dozen or so Russian and Crimean officials banning their travel to Europe and the US freezing their assets. This is a symbolic reaction but a chill has descended over Russia-West relations. An alarmed Polish Foreign Minister has compared the Crimean episode to “Anschluss”, the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany in 1938. Many analysts in Russia and the West see the beginning of a new phase of Cold War between the two sides.

On 15<sup>th</sup> March, a day before the referendum, Russia vetoed an American draft resolution describing the referendum in Crimea to be illegal and violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. China was the sole country to abstain. Other members of the Security Council voted for the resolution. Although the resolution was not adopted, Russia seemed isolated in international community.

China’s abstention can be interpreted both ways. The West could see it as splitting between Russia and the China. The Russians see Chinese abstention as China not supporting the Western position. China has said it stands for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. Taiwan must be on China’s mind. China is being careful. It has sought to take a cautious stand by abstaining.

Russia has cited the interests of Russians in Crimea as a reason for its proactive action. This must be causing worries in other former soviet republics where substantial ethnic Russian populations still live. A Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry statement condemned "all acts aimed at destabilizing the situation in Ukraine" and called for "the early settlement of the situation in Ukraine by peaceful means, through negotiations and dialogue, in accordance with international law and the United Nations Charter." Other Central Asian states have maintained silence indicating neutrality. These countries have substantial relationship with the West, China as well as Russia. Their caution is therefore understandable. On the Georgian issue in 2008, Russia was isolated in the CIS. No CIS country recognised the impendence of Abkhazia or Ossetia. Russia has always regarded Ukraine as crucial to its economic reintegration in CIS. That project has now suffered a serious set back.

The Crimean crisis began when President Yanukovitch was toppled in an illegal coup staged by ultra nationalists in Ukraine in February. Yanukovitch fled to Russia. The coup created a power vacuum in the country. Russia regards the present government in Ukraine as therefore illegal. The West is pouring in money to bolster the present government in Ukraine.

Russia-West relations have been tense since the Georgian crisis in 2008. President Obama's effort to "reset" the US-Russia relations in 2010 has not succeeded. The Crimean crisis is far more serious than the Georgia issue. The Russian-West fault line runs through Ukraine. Russia has made it clear that it will not accept Western meddling in Ukraine.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia felt vulnerable to NATO's eastward expansion and many central European countries joining the EU. The deployment of ballistic missile defence systems in Europe also enhanced Russian insecurities. Russia's proposal for a common security space from Vladivostok to Vancouver has been rejected by the West.

Putin seems to have concluded that Russia must draw the line at Ukraine. The EU bid to sign an economic and trade agreement with Ukraine in December drew Russia's ire and now Russia has moved to make Crimea its part. This changes the borders in Europe once again. The crisis has deepened the distrust between Russia and the West at a time when serious issues like Syria, Iran and Afghanistan are yet to be resolved.

Is the referendum illegal? It depends upon who one asks. Double standards are in evidence on all sides. Obviously, the West is extremely disturbed. Putin has pointed out that the

West enthusiastically supported the referendum in Kosovo when it separated from Serbia. Earlier, Ukraine had separated from Russia on the basis of a referendum. Putin has gone on to quote from a ruling of the UN International Court, dated 22 July 2010, “No general prohibition may be inferred from the practice of the Security Council with regard to declarations of independence”, and that “General International law contains no prohibition on declarations of independence...” The question is would not the referenda of this kind be a recipe for instability in multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual states?

How will the crisis unfold? Military solution is no option. Neither Russia nor the West can afford a military confrontation.

There is a talk of deeper sanctions. Given the substantial trade and economic cooperation between Russia and the members of the EU, sanctions will hurt both ways. But Russia, due to its economic weakness, is more vulnerable than Europe. For instance, German-Russia trade alone is worth 73 billion euros and Russia supplies natural gas to Germany through the northern stream gas pipeline. EU as a whole depends to the extent of 20 per cent of its energy needs. Over 6000 German companies do business in Russia. But Germany seems to be taking a tough stand and trying to maintain European unity.

The Russia-US standoff on Ukraine is beginning to impact key areas of global security. To begin with, the Russia-US cooperation on the implementation of the arms control agreement New START may be affected. Russian news media, quoting sources in the ministry of defence, published a report on 9<sup>th</sup> March speculating that Russia will stop receiving inspection groups from the US mandated under the New Start Treaty signed by Russia and the US in 2011.

There could be reaction in Ukraine. Russia has accused ultranationalists in Ukraine for the collapse of Yanukovich government and there is a possibility of terrorism rearing its head in the heart of Europe. What stance will BRICS take and the future of BRICS may be uncertain as Russia gets deeply embroiled in conflict with the West.

In the weeks to come, one can only hope that given the interdependence in the global economy, Russia and the West will resolve the issues through dialogue and negotiations. The West must pay attention to Russia’s security concerns and the Russians must act according to the international law by which they swear.

## **India**

What has been India's position on a crisis which involves its close friend and strategic partner Russia? Putin, looking for international legitimacy for his action he publicly appreciated India's "restraint and objectivity" on the issue. On 18 March, Putin called Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and briefed him on the evolving situation. According to a press release issued by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, the prime minister "emphasized the consistent position India had on the issues of **unity and territorial integrity of countries**" and hoped that "all sides would exercise restraint and work together constructively to find political and diplomatic solutions that protected the legitimate interests of all countries in the region and ensured long term peace and stability in Europe and beyond."

At this stage of the crisis, India has taken a balanced view of the situation. It has stressed the need to maintain the "unity and territorial integrity" of a country while and acknowledged the existence of "legitimate interests" of both sides while calling for diplomatic solutions.

Earlier, on March 6, before the referendum, India expressed concern for the fate of "more than 5000 Indian nationals" in Ukraine and called for "sincere and sustained diplomatic efforts to ensure that issues between Ukraine and its neighbouring countries are resolved through constructive dialogue". National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon in reply to a question acknowledged that "there are legitimate Russian and other interests involved".

Quite understandably India is exercising caution and restraint on this complex issue in view of its substantial strategic interests on both sides of the divide. India sources significant quantities of military equipment from Russia. A number of high profile defence production projects are on the anvil. Russia is also helping India set up new nuclear plants. India also has strategic partnership with the US and other western countries. There is no likelihood of UN sanctions against Russia because the latter will veto any such sanctions. India is unlikely to join unilateral .sanctions against Russia.

But, India will have to examine the implication of the referendum carefully in the light of its own position on Kashmir. It has time and again taken the position that the right to self-determination cannot be exercised by a part of a state. It cannot afford to openly endorse the results of the Crimean referendum and need not take a public position, which is essentially an issue between Russia and the West.

India would, however, be worried about the escalating tensions between Russia and the West. It has substantial interests with both the sides. It should ask for a peaceful resolution of the problem stressing that legitimate concerns of both must be taken into account. India did not recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 when the two republics broke away from Georgia and Russia fought a brief war with Georgia.

Non-alignment served India well during the Cold War years but has become a taboo in recent foreign policy discourse as India opened to the rest of the world and aspired for a position at the top table. Eventually there will be pressures on India from both the sides to take position as the East-West rift deepens. Undoubtedly India must actively engage with both sides but it may have to, once again, turn to a modified version of non-alignment suited for modern conditions.

*Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.*