

Crimea-Donbass

Background:

A crisis occurred between Russia and Ukraine from 22 February 2014 to 18 February 2015. The crisis had important and broad implications for Russian relations with Ukraine, other former Soviet states in the region, and members of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), including the United States.

PRE-CRISIS:

On 21 November 2013, Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovych sparked a wave of anti-government unrest – commonly known as “Euromaidan” – when he rejected a trade and political association agreement with the EU in favor of forging closer ties to Russia. Demonstrations in favor of closer European integration began in Kiev that evening and were initially peaceful, but they eventually spread to other parts of Ukraine and escalated into a series of increasingly violent clashes between protesters and police, as well as demands for the resignation of Yanukovych. Violence between protestors and police reached its peak in mid-February 2014, when both sides were firing at each other and the number of deaths increased significantly. Alarmed by the escalating use of repression by the Ukrainian government, the United States imposed visa bans on twenty senior Ukrainian governmental officials on 19 February. The EU followed suit the next day with its own package of sanctions that included travel bans and asset freezes targeted at Ukrainian officials as well as a ban on the export of equipment that could be used for repression by the Ukrainian government. Over the next several days, a number of MPs from the ruling party in Ukraine (the Party of Regions), the armed forces, and police resigned and/or defected to the opposition or fled to safe areas. Faced with a Ukrainian Parliament that was now dominated by the political opposition, Yanukovych was pressured into signing an EU-mediated agreement on 21 February to try and end the political and civil crisis in Ukraine. This diplomatic move was all for naught, as Yanukovych fled Kiev for eastern Ukraine later that night, and Parliament voted to remove him from office the following day. The opposition took over the Ukrainian government, and Maidan protestors captured the presidential palace and took control of Kiev.

Summary:

The removal of Yanukovych on 22 February 2014 sparked a crisis for Russia. Russia feared that Ukraine would leave its sphere of influence and become a NATO ally. Russia also expressed concerns about the rights of Russian-speakers in Ukraine, particularly in the predominantly Russian-speaking region of Crimea, where pro-Moscow protesters were calling for Crimea to secede from Ukraine.

Russian officials met the night of 22 February and into the morning of February 23, when it was decided that Crimea should be retaken and Yanukovych should be extracted from Ukraine. This constituted Russia’s major response to its crisis. Yanukovych showed up in Moscow on 26 February after leaving Ukraine with Russian assistance. On 27-28 February, unidentified soldiers (widely suspected, and later confirmed to have been Russian special forces) seized several government buildings and airports in Crimea, sparking a crisis for Ukraine. Ukraine’s major response to its crisis was verbal and began on 27 February, when it sent a note to Russia demanding that Russian troops stay on base in Crimea, called for calm, and discussed the

situation with Russia. The following day, Ukraine called for a meeting of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the final part of its major response.

On 1 March, the Russian Parliament gave President Vladimir Putin permission to use force in Crimea, and Russia launched a full-scale military intervention in the country that day. The move was met with little resistance from Ukraine, which was advised by the U.S. to avoid a military confrontation with Russia. Crimea was formally annexed on 18 March, following a local referendum two days earlier in which 97% of voters supported joining Russia. Non-violent military confrontations in Crimea continued until 25 March, when Ukraine withdrew completely from the region.

In the meantime, tensions also began to simmer between Ukraine and Russia in eastern Ukraine. Pro-Russian protests in the predominantly Russian-speaking Donbass region in eastern Ukraine began shortly after Crimea was annexed. At some point soon thereafter, Russia began to conduct military exercises in Rostov and other points near its border with eastern Ukraine, and it also began massing troops in the area, all with the intent to try and force Ukraine to back down in Donbass without having to resort to violence. Ukraine beefed up security at border checkpoints, citing fears that Russian troops may invade. Russia removed some of its forces from Rostov on 31 March after a conversation between the U.S. and Russian foreign ministers.

Pro-Russian militants in Donbass took control of several government buildings on April 7 and later declared independence from Ukraine – in the form of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) – following referenda. This set off a war between Ukrainian security forces and pro-Russian militias in Donbass, supported by Russian arms and widely suspected to have included Russian military members.

Ukraine responded to the initial events in Donbass with force. On 14 April, acting Ukrainian President Oleksandr Turchynov announced an anti-terror operation against pro-Russian separatists, although it was short-lived. On 22 April, Turchynov ordered more military operations against pro-Russian militants. Despite publicly denying an interest in intervening in Donbass, Russia increased its troop presence along Ukraine's southeastern border and began another series of military exercises on 23 April, raising concerns that it might conduct a full-fledged military intervention in Donbass if Ukraine appeared to be winning the conflict.

Russia and Ukraine were involved in a simultaneous dispute over the latter's natural gas debt to the former. Gazprom, one of Russia's largest oil companies, was demanding advance payments for natural gas until Ukraine paid off its debts. Ukraine perceived this as a Russian political maneuver related to the larger security and territorial issues at stake in the crisis. In May, the European Union (EU) Energy Commissioner began talks with Russia and Ukraine in an attempt to sort out a repayment plan that would keep the gas from being cut off. The Ukrainian pipelines also supply Europe, so there was a shared interest in resolving the debt dispute. On 15 June, talks over Ukraine's natural gas debt broke down. Russia cut the natural gas pipeline to Ukraine the following day. This move placed additional time pressure on Ukraine to resolve the crisis sooner.

On 17 July, pro-Russian militants mistakenly shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, a passenger plane that was flying over Donbass, with a Russian-made Buk anti-aircraft missile. The incident

garnered significant international media attention and engendered widespread condemnation and outrage but did not slow the pace of fighting in the region. In August, after a Ukrainian counter-offensive regained control of several cities and villages in Donetsk and Luhansk, Russian troops intervened openly in the conflict, sending tanks and missiles across the Ukrainian border.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) established a Trilateral Contact Group with Ukraine and Russia in June, initiating a mediation effort between the two sides. Separatist leaders from the DPR and LPR were also brought into the process. The OSCE brokered a ceasefire, the Minsk Protocol, between all sides on 5 September.

The ceasefire failed to hold, and the fighting continued largely unabated through 2014, albeit at a lower level than before Minsk I. On 30 October, Russia and Ukraine agreed to a natural gas supply deal.

Fighting escalated to pre-Minsk I levels again in January 2015. Pro-Russian rebels took control of the Donetsk airport on 15 January, signaling the full collapse of the Minsk Protocol. Around this time, DPR leader Alexander Zakharchenko said that he had no interest in peace talks and pledged to begin trying to move the front line.

In February 2015, a renewed round of talks occurred, this time initiated and led by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande. Merkel and Hollande mediated direct negotiations between Putin and new Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, but also coordinated closely with the OSCE, which focused on renewed mediation efforts under the Trilateral Contact Group and securing the cooperation of the DPR and LPR. On 6 February, Merkel and Hollande met privately with Putin for several hours, convincing him to return to the table. The mediation effort officially began the following day, when Russian, Ukrainian, and separatist leaders met for negotiations hosted by the OSCE. France and Germany threatened new sanctions if a deal wasn't reached, and the OSCE promised to monitor the implementation of an agreement if one was reached. The mediation effort resulted in a second ceasefire agreement between all sides, commonly known as Minsk II, on 12 February. The ceasefire was scheduled to take effect on 15 February. Fighting mostly ceased after the signing of this agreement, but some clashes continued for a short time afterward in the city of Debaltseve, ending after rebels retook the city on 18 February. Russian military advisors coordinated the assault on Debaltseve, and U.S. sources were confident that the shelling and rocket attacks in the area came from the Russian military. Ukraine's retreat from Debaltseve under fire terminated the crisis for both Ukraine and Russia.

In response to the events in Crimea, the U.S. advised Ukraine to not engage Russia militarily but also imposed economic sanctions on Russia. The sanctions were widely viewed as ineffective. In addition, the U.S. provided funds, military training, and military equipment – not including weapons – to Ukraine during the crisis.

The UN was involved in the crisis in several different capacities. On 27 March 2014, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution condemning the Russian annexation of Crimea. The UNSC adopted a resolution on 21 July 2014 condemning the downing of the Malaysia Airlines flight, and another resolution on 17 February 2015 endorsing Minsk II. The UNSC made several

attempts to pass a resolution condemning the referendum in and annexation of Crimea, but Russia repeatedly vetoed those efforts. The UN was also involved in the areas of human rights and refugee assistance. UN activity had little effect on the crisis proceedings.

Several regional organizations were involved in the crisis. In addition to its role as mediator, the OSCE deployed an observer group that monitored compliance with both Minsk ceasefire agreements and facilitated dialogue between local communities in eastern Ukraine, including between local residents and internally-displaced persons. In addition to its role in the natural gas dispute between Ukraine and Russia, the EU imposed several rounds of economic sanctions on Russia, first in March 2014 and then again in July and September 2014. The G8 suspended Russia's membership on 24 March 2014. NATO became involved after Ukraine approached it shortly after Yanukovich was ousted. In February 2014, the secretary general of NATO reiterated the organization's commitment to a 2008 declaration endorsing a path to NATO membership for Ukraine, provided that Ukraine met certain criteria. On 1 April 2014, NATO suspended civil and military cooperation with Russia. NATO also participated in general capacity-building in Ukraine, issued statements on the situation in Ukraine, and conducted limited military exercises, generally viewed as a means of reassuring local allies. Russia accused NATO of being involved in a more substantial manner militarily, but there was no evidence to support that accusation, and NATO avoided direct military intervention.

In the aftermath of Minsk II, the situation in Donbass remained more or less stalemated, though all sides made some limited progress in complying and implementing the agreement during the remainder of 2015. The OSCE monitored the implementation of Minsk II.

References:

ABC News; BBC; Bloomberg; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; CNN; EU Newsroom; Financial Times; NATO; NPR; NYT; OSCE; Reuters; RT; Ukrainian Independent Information Agency; UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library; U.S. White House Press Statements; VICE News; Washington Post.