

Briefing Memo

Three Level Factors of the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine

**Regional Studies Department
Hiroshi Yamazoe**

The international crisis over Ukraine still continues. In March 2014 the Crimean peninsula was annexed by the Russian Federation, and in April of the same year the anti-government forces started an armed conflict in “Donbass” (Donetsk and Luhansk regions) in Eastern Ukraine. A deal to establish a ceasefire was signed in September 2014 in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, and the further measures were stipulated in the so-called “Minsk II” agreement in February 2015; however these did not bring an end to the combat. Although the situation has more or less calmed down since September 2015, the problems are far from over. In this essay we will try to understand the conflict in Eastern Ukraine using a three-level analysis, and then go on to discuss this from the viewpoint of Ukraine and Russia.

The Three Levels of the Crisis in Ukraine

The first level is the problem facing Ukraine. Ethnic Russians in Ukraine identify themselves as part of a civic nation in Ukraine, and therefore the author does not regard Ukraine as being a divided nation. However, no successive government in Kiev has achieved political trust in all the regions and groups. In Ukraine, people who represent the interest of specific areas or specific groups have gained control of the country, and together with the business magnates called “oligarchs”, they have treated the central government as an opportunity for profit sharing. President Viktor Yanukovich, who led the “Party of Regions” that has a foothold in the eastern regions, even alienated most of his supporters by monopolizing the profits over his close aides. When he suddenly fled on the night of February 21st, 2014, after agreeing on cease-fire with the anti-government movement, nobody in the parliament or in the eastern regions supported him. The new authorities in Kiev seemed threatening to some Russian-speaking groups, who suspected Kiev would deprive the official status of the Russian language and then impose Ukrainian nationalists’ rule, resulting in numerous anti-Kiev protests in the southeastern regions. The army and security sector, which was already in a poor state to begin with, was thrown further into confusion immediately after the political change, and was unable to respond to the events happening in various parts of the southeast, allowing the secession of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine and the armed conflict in the Donbass region (although in Kharkiv the original state was restored). In Donbass the industrial development and the socialism of the former Soviet Union was regarded in a positive light and the antigovernment forces call themselves “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR) and “Lugansk People’s Republic” (LPR). Such conditions in Ukraine are far more serious compared to the situations in Latvia and Estonia, both of which also have problems concerning their ethnic-Russian residents. Moreover, such a development would probably not have happened had it not been for the abrupt behavior by Yanukovich.

The second level is the neighboring country, Russia. Although Russia behaves as a third-party mediator together with France and Germany, it is much more directly involved. Regarding the Crimean peninsula, Russia is clearly an interested party since it directly supported the secession of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine and then annexed it, claiming it originally belonged to Russia. Concerning the war in Donbass, whereas Russia as a mediator asserts that the rights of the minority should be protected, it is heavily involved in the existence of the anti-government forces and is considered to be giving them direct economic, political and military support. When the Ukraine army increased its presence in July 2014, the anti-government forces received “humanitarian aid” from Russia in August, resulting in the resurgence of the anti-government forces, and seized many of the border zones with Russia. Russian army soldiers became prisoners of war inside Ukraine, and the anti-government forces stated that they received assistance from the Russian army. Ukraine and the European Union see Russia as the interested party and the most influential factor in the state of affairs in Donbass.

The third level is the international environment surrounding Ukraine, in particular relations between Russia and the United States. Russia has been continuously resisting the expansion and strengthening of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). From 2011 to 2012 inside Russia the anti-Putin movement widely spread, which strengthened the Kremlin’s view that the West is attempting to destabilize Russia. The Kremlin ceased to regard the EU as a less threatening entity when it found in 2013 that the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine would prevent Ukraine from joining the Eurasian Economic Union, another integration scheme of Russia’s side (also stated by EU representatives. Štefan Füle, “Ambitions of EU and East Partners for the Vilnius Summit,” European Commission, 28 May 2013). In fact, Ukraine’s move for NATO membership was already suspended in 2008, but Russia continued to believe the West would anyway turn Ukraine against Russia. In any case, during February 2014, Russia was not convinced of the stability of the situation and took action, thinking that there was a kind of a “power vacuum” in Ukraine and the use of “force” was appropriate.

Apart from this harsh reality in terms of classical balance of power, what merits attention here is the role of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Both Ukraine and Russia are member nations, and OSCE has become a place for regular dialogue and has acted as intermediary in ceasefire negotiations. The OSCE dispatched a Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine in March 2014, and started monitoring of the situations in each region. Although there are combat zones and border zones OSCE observers are not allowed to monitor, both belligerent sides basically accept what the observers report on the website. However, the monitoring is by a civilian authority and cannot perform concrete measures against ceasefire violations. Nevertheless it has, to some extent, been instrumental in stopping widespread inhumane treatment.

As illustrated above, improvement in all three levels would be necessary for a long-term stable order, not only discussing the way to change Russia by sanctions or the necessity for the West to approve the Russian sphere of influence.

Ukraine’s Challenges and Efforts

Ukraine cannot reverse the current state whereby there are areas that cannot be directly controlled, and neither will it be able to meet the requirements necessary to join NATO. On the other hand, in terms of public attitude it was evident that the country was going through a parting of the ways with Russia, which in turn strengthened the

national identity of the Ukrainian people. The results of previous public opinion polls showed that the EU and Russia received equal votes as partner countries, but after the outbreak of the crisis the majority of the voters have chosen EU as the preferred partner, and furthermore, many of the residents who tend to vote for pro-Russian policies have been removed from the voting process. Although there is a possibility for future policies that seek compromise or cooperation with Russia, it is unlikely that the civil society will continuously support the pro-Russian tendency, and the level of unification that Russia hopes for will probably not be reached.

Correspondingly, public order management is gradually improving in Ukraine. The military and the security sector were not functioning sufficiently between February and April 2014. In the summer of 2014 the Ukrainian military had gained control over Donbass, but in August the anti-government forces regained power and the Minsk Agreement in September was followed by a ceasefire in the interim. The anti-government forces gained control again in January 2015, and even after the enactment of the Minsk II Agreement, they occupied the strategically important town of Debaltseve. After that the anti-government forces' offensive to gain control over Mariupol, an important port city by the Sea of Azov, has been blocked by the Ukraine military and the pro-Kiev militants, which is an indication that the Ukraine side is gaining resistance.

Meanwhile, there are still obstacles facing the unity of the people. The Minsk Agreement addressed the strengthening of the local autonomy by Ukraine through a reform of the constitution, and local elections to be conducted through talks with the anti-government forces, but the government of Kiev is conducting its affairs without dialogue with the anti-government forces. There is a deep-rooted opinion in Kiev that they should not readily compromise with anti-government forces, and ultimately Russia. In addition the Ukrainian authorities consider the anti-government forces a "terrorist organization" and have executed "anti-terrorist operations"—conduct attacks that could easily harm residents—and there have been instances where nationalist irregular troops have also participated. A considerable number of residents are thought to be supportive of the anti-government forces since they can still not trust the government in Kiev.

In the long term, the economic and industrial development and advancement of democratic governance of Ukraine would become a solid foundation to ensure a stable local society free of disorder. Ukraine needs to overcome the weakness of the economy and energy efficiency, which allowed chaotic diplomacy that depended on low-price gas from Russia, and to eliminate the secret maneuvering of oligarchs and police corruption. Japan also supports Ukraine's efforts in these areas by dispatching experts on anti-corruption measures and the improvement of energy efficiency, while also providing human resources and financial support through OSCE activities.

The Choices by the Putin Administration

The approval rating of the Putin administration has increased due to its "strong foreign policy" and even the economic sanctions and the import barrier on European food has not resulted in criticism of the government by the people. Nonetheless, the drawbacks to the financial market due to the sanctions and the drop in the international crude oil prices from the latter half of 2014 have made it difficult for the administration to continue pursuing the conventional fiscal management strategies. The budget compilation process in 2015 was thrown into chaos due to the difficulty in calculating anticipated tax yields. Moreover, Russia wants to avoid further deterioration of business

environment and diplomatic relations with the European countries. For Russia, an extreme escalation of the crisis in Ukraine is not a viable option.

On the other hand, there is also a danger of being viewed as too conciliatory to the West. The term “Novorossiya” is a historical term for a region conquered by the Russian empire in the 18th century, and is used to justify the claim that Russia has special rights to the current southeast regions of Ukraine. For example, Aleksandr Dugin, a political scientist and author famous for his “geopolitical” works, states that it is clear Russia has reverted from a Western-style state to the Russian civilization due to the Crimea admission, and argues that Russia should “liberate” the southeast Ukraine that belongs to Russia in terms of civilization (Aleksandr Dugin, *Geopolitika Rossii*, Moscow: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2014, pp.489-501). So far the Putin administration has not shown any movement toward a Crimea-like annexation scenario of DPR and LPR in the Donbass region. If the administration was to show a further tendency to withdraw, then the group of people who have supported the notion of “a strong foreign policy” will be upset. The Putin administration is pursuing diplomatic efforts in a narrow range of choices, by seeking to improve the relations with Europe and the United States under the leadership of Russia and not under any pressure such as sanctions.

In August 2015, fighting erupted in the surrounding areas of Mariupol in the Donbass region. However, a cease-fire has been maintained since September and a withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front lines is also underway. Conversely, Russia embarked on a military operation in Syria. Since September 30th Russian planes in Syria have been launching attacks on the bases of anti-government forces in the surrounding area. On October 7th Russia fired cruise missiles from warships in the Caspian Sea at targets in Syria, displaying the ability of its precision-guided weapons. The missiles flew through the Iranian and Iraqi airspace en route to Syria after coordination with both countries. This was aimed at getting the United States to sit down at the negotiating table with Russia to discuss the United States’ headache over the Assad Regime and the “Islamic State”. It resulted in the signing of an agreement between Russia and the United States to minimize the risks of air incidents over Syria. Oleksiy Melnyk, in his comment on 26 October 2015 at the Razumkov Centre in Kiev, points out that Putin’s goal of separating southeastern eight states from Ukraine has failed due to the resistance of Ukraine, and that the military actions in Syria are a token of the military success he is trying to show his citizens wishing for military glory overseas. While there is a possibility that a cease-fire will continue in Donbass for a few more months, President Putin could also escalate the military actions at whatever time.

Russia’s Syrian operation gives the impression that rational steps are taken in line with these objectives, but we must keep in mind that Russia has the power to change the state of affairs in Donbass. If the risk calculations of the Putin regime change again, there is a possibility that the situation in Eastern Ukraine could become more serious.

(Completed on November 6, 2015)

The views expressed in this article are of the author’s own, and not necessarily those of the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), Japan Ministry of Defense.

All rights reserved. Contact information is available at the Planning & Management Division, Planning & Administration Department, NIDS. (URL):<http://www.nids.go.jp>