

**Monthly Global Security Briefing – March 2014**

## **The Ukraine Crisis in Relation to Syria and Iran**

Paul Rogers

### **Summary**

The Russian annexation of Crimea may be in direct contravention of international agreements but is popular in Russia and almost certain to hold. Given tensions within Ukrainian society and its weak transitional government, there remains some risk of further intervention in eastern Ukraine and possibly the Trans-Dniester break-away region of Moldova. Even if there is no further escalation in the crisis, the deterioration in EU/Russian and US/Russian relations is of great concern, not least in relation to two aspects of Middle East security – the Syrian civil war and the Iran nuclear negotiations.

### **Introduction**

President Vladimir Putin's recent actions have been generally popular in Russia where recent political developments in Kiev have been seen as a serious encroachment by the EU into a crucial Russian sphere of influence and a massive setback to Putin's idea of creating a counter-weight Eurasian Union. Putin's muscular approach to restoring Russia to its historic greatness, readily seen in the huge expenditure on the recent Winter Olympics as well as the Eurasian Union vision to reconnect former Soviet republics, is well received by many Russians. Whether there is further intervention depends very much on the weak government in Kiev's capacity to limit civil disorder that might be fomented by ultra-nationalists, including around the 25 May presidential election. This will not be easy since it would be in Russia's interest to be able to respond to just such disorder and it may well seek to encourage local militias in southern and eastern Ukraine. Understanding the perceptions of the Kremlin (and wider Russian society) towards both the rest of Europe and Ukrainian nationalism is critical in understanding how Moscow may act in the coming months.

### **The Question of Perceptions**

A key issue in the crisis is the question of perceptions. At the height of the Cold War, there were very few western analysts and politicians who were able to visualise the world from the Kremlin's perspective. The so-called "Red Team" studies in NATO defence ministries were primarily concerned with how the Soviet Union might fight a war, not with its wider world view. There was, for example, little understanding of the enduring impact of the Great Patriotic War on Soviet/Russian attitudes towards Germany and elements, including Ukrainian, Romanian/Moldovan and Baltic nationalists, which cooperated with its invasion of the USSR.

While Russia sees itself as a once-great superpower that justifiably seeks to re-establish that status, there remains a deep resentment stemming from the experience of the 1990s. The embrace of "turbo-capitalism", the near collapse of the economy and, above all, the disdain

with which Russia was treated by the West are all still deeply embedded in the political outlook, and it is this which does much to make the “tilt” of Ukraine towards the EU so unacceptable.

The western perception of Russia, though, is also significant. Anyone over the age of forty, which includes almost the entire western political class, has deep memories of the Cold War era in which the Soviet Union was seen as the head of a hugely powerful bloc that had overwhelming military superiority in Europe, only counter-balanced by NATO’s nuclear forces. The vision of massed tank armies deployed right into Eastern Europe was deep-seated but it also assumed that there was strength in depth within the Soviet heartland – Russia. Even now, Russia as the successor state of the Soviet Union is seen to retain some of those elements of power, but this is not supported either by its current economic strength or its conventional military capabilities.

### **Russia: a Paper Bear?**

Although Russia has enjoyed reasonable economic growth over the past decade this has been from a very low base and does not bring Russia anywhere near the economic power of the United States, China, Japan or even Germany. Russian GDP is less than a seventh of that of the US, a quarter of that of China and much less than half of that of Japan. In spite of its (declining) population being more than double the size of the UK or France, its GDP matches neither country and is not even two-thirds that of Germany.

Furthermore, much of Russia’s wealth is concentrated in and around Moscow and St Petersburg and is largely in the hands of a small elite. Most of Russia has benefited little from the growth of recent years, but control of the media by the state and its power over political processes limits the extent of the recognition of these divisions and of opposition to Putin.

While Russia is still a substantial nuclear power, its conventional armed forces are singularly weak, as was shown by the considerable difficulties in mounting air operations against Georgia in August 2008. There is substantial spending now devoted to rebuilding Russia’s conventional armed forces but this is still at an early stage. To put it bluntly, Russia’s impressive array of forces used in Crimea and massed close to Ukraine hide a deep-seated conventional weakness in an economy which is heavily resource-dependent.

In the short term, Putin can maintain control of Crimea and may increase Russian influence in the rest of Ukraine, but its recent actions actually militate against the development of the Eurasian Community. Furthermore, Western European states will now be far more cautious in their economic dealings with Russia and will work progressively to limit their dependence on Russian gas and oil. In the long term, the recent popular actions in Crimea are likely to damage Russia, and it is most likely that any further western sanctions will be represented by Putin as further proof of the need for Russia to be strong and independent.

## Context Implications for Syria and Iran

**Syria:** The war in Syria continues to be bedevilled by the double proxy element, with regime support from Iran and Russia countered by rebel support from Saudi Arabia and the West.

Western policy is in disarray:

- Secular elements in the rebellion are weak and disunited, offering limited opposition to the regime.
- Radical Islamist paramilitaries are offering much stronger resistance to the regime but are not themselves united even if some elements now control substantial territory.
- The regime is firmly ensconced even if it is presiding over a terribly damaged country.

Western policy seems now concentrated on providing support for the disunited rebels, especially south of Damascus, while ensuring that advanced weapons do not get into the hands of jihadist elements concentrated in the north and east. This may be so difficult that it is essentially impossible, meaning that the extent of the support will be limited. The Syrian War thus has no prospect of ending unless the major proxy players, the US and Russia, are prepared to work together. The Ukraine crisis makes this far less likely than even a month ago, when the Geneva II peace talks adjourned without progress.

On present trends the war will continue. The main regime tactic is to use its considerable firepower advantage (in terms of artillery, rockets and air-dropped barrel bombs) to so damage rebel areas that they lose control of territory. Since the regime does not have the reliable ground forces available to hold such territory the policy is one of denial, but the human and economic costs are immense. As the regime continues with this approach, it becomes more likely that Gulf States such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia will resist US pressure and return to their policy of backing a wider range of Islamist rebels.

**Iran:** The negotiations on the nuclear issue between the US and Iran are continuing, albeit at a low level, but have so far survived considerable opposition from within Iran and the US. They may be influenced by the domestic economic problems that the Rouhani government is currently experiencing and his honeymoon period is essentially over.

US/Russian relations are less relevant here but will come to the fore if the negotiations do make progress because this may give Rouhani more room to improve relations with Saudi Arabia. *Any improvement in the Saudi/Iranian relationship should be encouraged by any means possible – it is one of the few areas in the region with potential.* However, if there is progress and this can serve to diminish the differences over Syria, then Russia's influence over the Assad regime will become more significant.

## Conclusion

The crisis that has erupted in Ukraine is an occasion for just the kind of analysis that was so missing in the Cold War period. Russian behaviour over Ukraine - and Crimea in particular -

may be entirely unacceptable in the west but, given the nature of the Putin regime and its recognition of deep-seated and enduring Russian sensibilities over the loss of empire twenty years ago, it is entirely understandable. In spite of the problems it causes, there is a real need for caution, not least because Putin may prefer a continuing crisis in order to bolster domestic support. If the Ukraine crisis escalates further, the impact for European security is likely to be substantial but the limiting of prospects for any kind of progress in Syria will be an even greater human disaster.

European policy-makers can help to mitigate the negative impacts of the crisis in three ways:

- Urging caution on the part of NATO in response to the Ukraine crisis;
- Encouraging in-depth analysis by European states of current Russian attitudes;
- Endeavouring to support improvements in Iranian-Saudi relations in order to bypass the likely new deadlock in US-Russian relations over Iran and Syria.

None is easy – all are necessary.

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