

CAG COMMENTRY SERIES

THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS AND THE CHANGING WORLD ORDER

The Ukrainian Crisis and the End of the Cold War¹

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This commentary briefly considers some systemic changes taking place in the international system in light of the recent Ukrainian Crisis. It is shown that the unipolar standing of the United States is undermined and that the Western policies in the Post-Soviet Space are led not by democratic values but by purely economic and geopolitical interests. It is also suggested that the current Ukrainian crisis has a potential to become the end, rather than the beginning, of the Cold War.

The Ukrainian crisis has triggered a Western media blitzkrieg condemning Vladimir Putin making it hard for even an adept observer to form an informed and factually accurate view of things. The media-generated demonization of the Russian President has tightly camouflaged some important changes in the international system. The first change is structural and deals with the distribution of capabilities in the international system. The second one is rather ideological and deals with the unprecedented amount of hypocrisy in the Western policies of

exporting democracy and, therefore, with the legitimacy of the Western world order.

Systemic changes

The systemic changes reside in the fact that the American Unipole has found itself in a world it does not control anymore. Despite the fact that the power threshold of balancing against the United States is still high (America's material primacy is still uncompromised), other important conditions of unipolar standing, such as the effectiveness of the American Grand Strategy, the benevolent image of it and its policies, and unavailability of

allies outside the U.S. alliance system have been severely undermined.

Failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, the damage the financial meltdown has done to the “American brand” and liberal world order, obvious foreign policy defeats in Syria as well as soft-power-undermining whistle-blowers fleeing to what Mr. Romney calls “America’s number one geopolitical foe” have undermined the predominance of American unipolarity. At the same time, inability of the United States to obtain the European state’s support of the American hard-line approach toward Russia during the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and now during the Ukrainian crisis demonstrates the fact that the legitimacy of American leadership in European affairs has diminished, and that there are serious cracks in the system of alliances created by the U.S. during and after the Cold War. If the European participants of NATO do not support American policy initiatives, NATO can go from being an instrument of American policy, to a mechanism for containing the U.S. And Russia, in fact, managed to contain the United States through some European NATO participants, especially Germany and France.

After the period of unquestioned domination during the unipolar interlude of the 1990s, these developments now manifest the beginning of a painful for America “return to normalcy.” During this process, the anti-Russian blinkers are dangerous because not only do they misinform the general public about Russia’s real stand on the Ukrainian issue, but they also tie American policy makers closely to the constructed anti-Russian sentiment limiting their capacity to undertake a more balanced foreign policy, necessary for the avoidance of further overstretching of an already overstretched empire.

Cornering Russia on the issue of Ukraine is dangerous for the maintenance of the Western world order because Russia, due to its geography, is much more powerful than it seems to be. As the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 has demonstrated, its capacity to project power in its salient environment is much higher than the raw figures of population, GDP, military expenditure, military personnel as well as rumours about Russia’s military backwardness might suggest. The possibility of direct military engagement of the United States, (not to mention E.U. members), next to Russian borders is highly unlikely. At the same time, due to

scarce economic links between Russia and the United States and strong energy dependence of Europe on Russia, Putin can remain fairly indifferent to American calls to impose sanctions on Russia. Moreover, Russian politicians have warned their American and European counterparts that they will also impose retaliatory sanctions, not necessarily symmetrical way. The Western containment toolkit, therefore, is rather limited.

The inability of the West to contain Russia geopolitically and its simultaneous failure to find a peaceful common ground with Russia on the Ukrainian Crisis has provoked cascades of Russophobic hysteria in the West. Meanwhile, Putin has, again, successfully beaten his western counterparts at geopolitical chess game by gainfully changing Russia’s national geographic map. Regardless of different normative interpretations, brining Crimea – an extremely important geostrategic asset with predominantly Russian population and crucially important military bases – back to Russia is a substantial geopolitical victory. Despite being dehumanised by the Western media, the Russian “annexation” of Crimea has caused zero civilian casualties and was accompanied by a popular referendum – a striking contrast to the Western military interventions known so far.

Putin has won. The United States and its Western supporters, in turn, have to register still another crushing failure on their side and to add it to the existing list of the recent diplomatic failures. In an attempt to castigate Russia, American government is now making big normative claims it cannot deliver anymore. This strongly undermines the superpower’s credibility. In this light, it would hardly be a gross exaggeration to say that the Ukrainian crisis marks the end of American and, in a broader sense, Western global domination.

Geopolitics behind Democratic Conditionality

Even though material capabilities of the United States are still unmatched, the situation in Ukraine will have serious soft-power implications for the West, because it has revealed diplomatic incompetency and, even worse, hypocrisy of the Western grand project of selling ‘democracy’ abroad. There are several relevant observations in this regard.

The main trigger of public protests in Ukraine was the refusal by the President Viktor Ynukevich to sign the fully-negotiated Association Agreement

with Europe, offering deeper political and economic cooperation and a Free Trade agreement. The question is: Why did not the EU sign this agreement with Ukraine just a little bit earlier when an overtly pro-Western and anti-Russian predecessor of Yanukovich – Viktor Yushenko – was in power in Ukraine? Instead, the EU started to push the Association agenda forward so actively only recently, when a more pro-Russian and less cooperative – hence harder for Brussels to deal with – Viktor Yanukovich is at the helm? For those who want to understand the nature of the current political crisis in Ukraine, this is the key question to answer.

The proclaimed reason for not signing the Association Agreement earlier was the declining democratic performance in Ukraine. The EU leaders refused to give up on political conditionality and postponed the realisation of the Association agenda. This argument, however, cannot stand. If democratic conditionality mattered, Brussels had all reasons for not offering the Association agreement to Yanukovich. Under his rule, Ukraine, by all measures, became more authoritarian: power and economic resources had been concentrated in the hands of a secluded group of political and economic elites; elections became more biased; state control of media increased; opposition leaders and NGOs were repeatedly harassed; and the reintroduction of a strong presidency and weakening the independence of judiciary were in full swing.

Nevertheless, Europe and the United States have decided to push the Association agenda forward with even stronger zeal. The West hurried to recognise the Ukrainian revolutionary government, which has toppled an officially-elected acting president, and had done so in the violation of the agreement between Yanukovich and the opposition leaders, reached on February 21 under the mediation of France, Germany and Poland one day before Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's parliament) removed Yanukovich from power. That time Russia did not want much. The agreement implied, first, the implementation of constitutional reforms in Ukraine and the creation of a coalition government. Second, Russia insisted that this reform was preceded by negotiations including all political forces of Ukraine. Third, Crimea should be granted more autonomy and be able to choose its cultural identity and decide on its internal

arrangements; for that, Crimea did not have to be part of Russia. These, however, did not satisfy the West.

The immediate rationale behind offering more authoritarian and less cooperative Yanukovich the Association Agreement and, thus, putting democratic conditionality aside seems to be purely geopolitical. Even though Brussels and Washington might deny this interpretation and wrap their policies in the democratisation rhetoric, the facts speak for themselves.

Since 2012, Moscow has successfully moved forward with its ambitious Eurasian Integration project. Originally underestimated by the West, the project has suddenly fleshed out in a number of practical steps. The single economic space including Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia was established and the Eurasian Economic Commission, modelled on the European Commission, started functioning. Other post-soviet countries, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have also expressed their interest in joining the organisation. The leaders of the member states are expected to sign an all-embracing treaty on the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union by January 1, 2015. The Eurasian Union means the unification of economic policies in the post-soviet space, elaboration of common market strategies, and, like in the case of the European Union, the implementation of common policies toward non-member states, including Europe and the United States. Moreover, shortly after the Eurasian Economic Commission was established, Syria and Vietnam have also expressed its interest to join in the near future. Turkey is supposed to be invited as well, and Iran expressed its desire to increase cooperation with the new Eurasian integration union.

Not surprisingly, the United States and its Western supporters have expressed their opposition to the Eurasian Union, calling it an attempt to re-establish USSR. In December 2012, the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton clearly stated that the goals of the Eurasian Union are well known and that U.S. will try to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it. One way to do so is to prevent Ukraine from joining the Russia-led Eurasian Union. Western policies in the post-soviet space, therefore, have nothing to do with democracy promotion. They are implemented bearing in mind – as many other actions in

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international relations – the ruthless protection of geopolitical interests. Ukraine fell prey to geopolitics and was literally torn apart by the opposing forces coming from Russia and the West. In this sense, the return of Crimea to Russia is probably just a very successful strategic improvisation on the Russian side, spurred by the Western policies toward Ukraine.

Ukrainian crisis as the end of the Cold War

The current policy of the United States and its European supporters are in no one's interests. It undermines both hard and soft power of the United States and its European supporters. The United States is unable to sustain its containment of Russia any longer. Russia, in turn, has decided to act in accordance with its national interests and to ignore whatever condemnation and abuse, – arguably empty rhetoric in this case – coming from Washington or Brussels.

Economic isolation of Russia is not feasible, whereas political and cultural estrangement of Russia is counterproductive. Within the context of Russia's economic pivot to Asia, the geopolitical cost of such policies may turn out to be unbearable for the West. However, the situation in Ukraine may turn out to be an opportunity to truly reverse the unchanged Cold War logic of international politics.

In the early 90s, the disintegration of the Soviet Union astounded even the most open-minded intellectuals and politicians. It was interpreted as

the embodiment of the 'end of history' and as an absolute victory of the Western liberal order. It was used to legitimise the hegemonic stance of the West. Russia disagrees with such interpretation. Was it the West who has won? And does the collapse of the Soviet Union prove the superiority of the Western-liberal world order? Did Soviet Union collapse because the Soviet system was inferior or did it collapse due to some other reasons? Is it the result of successful American policies or is it just a coincidence? Unfortunately, we cannot re-run the history to answer these questions. Now it is covered by decades of propaganda and misinformation. Generations have passed and Russia's defeat in the Cold War has become a part of common sense. But since we do not know the true causes, it is reasonable to be more cautious when interpreting the results of the Cold War.

In 1991 Soviet Union collapsed. However, it was not followed by a multi-party international conference, which would spell out the reconfigured state interests and spheres of influence signifying the official ending of the Cold War. The lack of a clear ending has been the cause of multiple tensions between Russia and the West. Now, the potential settlement of the Ukrainian crisis represents an opportunity for all the parties involved to finally break the vicious cycle of the worsening Russian-West relations and to seal the end of the highly prolonged Cold War era.

¹ The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of The Centre on Asia and Globalisation, The Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy or the National University of Singapore.

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