

## **RUSSIAN RESURGENCE AND THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE IN THE 'NEAR ABROAD': A CASE STUDY OF THE CRISIS IN UKRAINE**

### **Prelude**

The most fatal and lingering crisis in the post –Soviet Ukraine began as a protest against the pro-Russian government for halting closer trade ties with the EU. The *euromaidan*'s ouster of President Yanukovich and the subsequent election of the pro-EU, Tymoshenko ally triggered Russian fears of the western encirclement, thus prompting the Russian intervention in the Crimean Peninsula, home to nearly 60% of ethnic Russians and its Black Sea fleet. The step runs counter to the Peace and Friendship Treaty signed by Yeltsin in 1997 that recognized the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and commitment that Russia does not lay any claim to any part of Ukraine. The crisis has since then spurred a global clash between Russia and the western powers.

### **Genesis of the crisis in Ukraine**

One reason for the crisis today, is the Ukrainians inability to resolve the dilemma of its identity since its independence in 1991 and evolving of strong political institutions, which has in turn resulted in impeded economic growth, a fragile economy and corrupt leadership under the strong influence of powerful oligarchs. Secondly, the presence of the Black Sea Fleet in the Crimean Peninsula, that became part of Ukraine when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gave the peninsula to his native land in 1954. Russia kept its half of the Soviet fleet, but was troubled in 2009 when the pro-Western Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko warned that it would have to leave the key port by 2017. Shortly after pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich was elected president in 2010; he agreed to extend the Russian lease until 2042 in exchange for discounts on Russian gas supplies. Russia fears that Ukraine's new pro-Western government could force them to leave it. Yanukovich's government therefore used massive crackdowns on any reformist movements of Orange Revolution even going to the extent of imprisoning of

the opposition leader Tymoshenko on charges of abuse of power had further created hatred among the population.

The European free trade agreement, which Yanukovich agreed to sign by late 2013, carried the condition of releasing Tymoshenko. Thus spurring fears among the Russians for the eviction of its Black Sea fleet. Under increased pressure from Russia, he declined the deal; provoking demonstrations in Kiev came to be associated with the name “Euromaidan” by protestors claiming alliance with Europe. The demonstrations lead to Yanukovichs ouster and Russia’s racing its forces to Crimea and holding a referendum, in order to keep their presence in the region. Thirdly, it is the structure of the international system, forcing Russia to take such aggressive steps, because of the west especially the US failure to understand the country and has been looked at it with suspicion. In short, Russia was never been taken on equal terms as Thomas Graham says, “Russia has an exceedingly negative image in the United States. It has few friends in the congress or more broadly in the Political establishment or key media”(Graham 2009) the relationship especially deteriorated after 2003 when the US insisted that Russia must find a political solution to the Chechnya problem by holding talks with those considered terrorists by the Kremlin.<sup>1</sup> Bush’s national security advisor Condoleezza Rice insisted that Russia was a threat to America and its European allies.

### **Sources of Russian Resurgence**

Russia derives its power from its land and population; it has 2.4% of the world’s population and 10% of the world’s territory that is enough to provide a sufficient standard of living for 450 million people. It is home to 21% of the planets natural resources – including 45% of the world natural gas, oil and 23% of its coal<sup>2</sup> that has played an important role in its resurgence on the world stage with Putin’s leadership in 2000 to 2008. During this time span Russia regained much of its lost influence of the Soviet Era. Putin’s most recent Paralympics at Sochi ,an area that lies in proximity of Crimea could be telling the saga of the bear abandoning its hibernation , pouncing and roaring loudly to make the world feel of its presence. The development of Vladivostok and an excellent university on Russky Island, declaring its right to the Arctic,

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<sup>1</sup> Tsygankov P. Andrei . **U.S.-Russia Relations in the Post-Western World**, In *Responding to a Resurgent Russia: Russian Policy and Responses from the EU and U.S.*, edited by Vinod K. Aggarwal and Kristi Govella.

<sup>2</sup> Rykhtik, Mikhail. "How Russia Sees the World." In *Responding to a Resurgent Russia*, pp. 15-33. Springer New York, 2012.

supporting Assad regime in Syria, conducting soviet style parades in the Red Square, Vladislav Surko's concept of sovereign democracy, and Medvedev's concept of near "abroad" are very clearly telling the world "we are back".

### **The Concept of 'Near abroad'**

The Russian Near abroad<sup>3</sup> became independent entities on the world stage after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Post Communist Russia traditionally viewed the region through the prism of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Since Russia never wanted, a complete parting with the region as such there was always an effort made to keep it under its influence due to the political, economic and strategic importance of the region. Firstly, Russia's near abroad works as a buffer against the threats emanating from the NATO overtures in the post Soviet space. It also keeps Russia safe from the spillover of instability, which the region is home to since most of the countries have extremely fragile political and economic systems. Secondly, since most of the Russian gas pipelines transit the territory of the near abroad a stable export route and a functioning pipeline system is crucial for the country's existence, since the region has provided Russia the great power status. Thirdly, the region is home to a large number of ethnic Russians.

Dmitry Medvedev's five pronged agenda for the Russian Foreign Policy articulated in 2009, emphasized on the protection of its citizens, businesses and the Russian community living abroad and claims the region of the near abroad as Russia's sphere of privileged interests. For the Russian history specialist H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse , Near "abroad" is an inclusive term ,which is conceptualising the post-Soviet region, unlike the CIS .Thus making the three Baltic states part of it even though they managed to move out of Russia's 2004 Compatriots orbit, by their accession to the EU and NATO membership. The protection of Russian citizens living in countries of the 'Near Abroad' from nationalistic, anti-Russian sentiments provides Russia with the justification to interfere in the domestic affairs of its neighbours, as well as to enhance its military presence and the construction of military bases, in the region. The presence of the Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia is a very pertinent

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<sup>3</sup> Near "abroad" refers to the 14 states that were part of the USSR, which included Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belorussia (now Belarus), Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan

example of seeing the practical application of the law of defending the ethnic Russians in the near abroad, thus a pretext for controlling regions of significant importance to Russia.

Georgian five-day war in 2008 has some similarities and differences to the situation in Ukraine today. The two situations has commonality in their strategic importance, as they offer Russia a short access to the warm waters of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, unlike the Vladivostok and Murmansk that are too far in the east. The ports of Odessa and Sevastopol provide both military and commercial access for exports from southern Russia. Ukraine is extremely important to Russian national security. The 2007 Orange revolution triggered an anti- western impression among the Russians who saw it as an attempt by the west to encircle Russia. Since the region, from Russia's strategic standpoint is considered it s soft underbelly as such it poses existential threat to Russia in case of an enemy takeover. It is different in a way that South Ossetia and Abkhazia were parts of Georgia that stayed away from Tbilisi's control for 15 years. Their defacto independence guaranteed by the Russian peacekeeping troops. The five-day war started, when the Georgian army in South Ossetia attacked Russian peacekeepers. That brought the Russian troops to Tbilisi, until the French mitigated the situation. However, Ukraine on the other hand has very carefully avoided providing an excuse for the Russians to open fire. Ukraine is also important from the prospect of its membership in the proposed Eurasian Union that would become functional by 2015<sup>4</sup>.

### **A reaction to NATO and EU overtures:**

After the demise of the Soviet Union, the EU and NATO became the most influential members in the post soviet space. Russia due its economic collapse was not in a position to push its interests in the region. The European Union's decision to extend its membership to Finland in 1995 and the Baltic states in 2004 brought Russia and Europe into close proximity. To help the Post Communist transition the EU policy aimed at creating clear divisions by offering aid and membership to the Central and Eastern European countries and aid and cooperation to the post soviet states. A certain period

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<sup>4</sup> whose likely members include Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Armenia. Ukraine's membership would increase the union's population "[by a solid 27 percent](#)," writes Simon Saradzhyan, a research fellow at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center.

of prosperous relations existed between the two during which various agreements were signed by the EU due to its reliance on the external energy suppliers and Russia being one major supplier. However, the relations turned sour due to an increasing discord between the “old” and “new” EU members, who had strong memory of suspicions of Russia and were greatly receptive to the US influence directed their foreign policies towards Russia to focus more on normative issues related to human rights and democratization. EU's efforts of eastward expansion is considered very disturbing by Russia, since that actions mean strengthening western institutional ties at the expense of Russia's Eurasian Union. On the other hand, NATO being the security provider of the EU, its presence in the areas close to the Russian Near abroad bent on promoting the concept of liberal democracies in the regions identified by the Russians as its sphere of influence, created large-scale insecurities in the Russian circles. Security for Russia means stability in the post-Soviet space, whereas for countries like Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan it means safeguard of their territories. The US in this regard has played a “Hard security game” in the region by assisting those states and not Russia.

### **Findings:**

Thus, the post soviet space has once again become a contested region for the Great Power rivalry. However, this time it may not result in a full-scale war due to the growing economic interdependence in the region especially, the trade dependence of resource hungry Europe on Russia is about 11% according to the 2013 EU trade statistics<sup>5</sup>.

The Super Power rivalry might once again, trigger the cold war thinking in the region as neither the US nor the Russians have worked on creating a benign image of one another after the end of the cold war.

The port of Sevastopol in Crimea had always been home to the Black Sea fleet, founded by Catherine the Great, as a naval base in 1783. Ukraine's ambitions to NATO accession make it obligatory on the member country to be free of the foreign bases. This is going to be a very difficult choice for both Ukraine and Russia to come to terms

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<sup>5</sup> Russia –trade-european Commission.ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countires and regions. Accessed on 17.3.2014

with, as Russia would never be willing to give up its Black sea fleet. Thus, the successful referendum will bring a permanent Russian influence in the region and the division of Ukraine into a pro-Russia and Pro-Western state.