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### UKRAINE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND NATO: LIMITS OF EXTERNAL BALANCING

### **Mumtaz Ahmad Shah**

PhD Research Scholar, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Humanities and Social Science Department India, Tamil Nadu, Chennai.

#### **ABSTRACT:**

In the post-Soviet period, Ukraine emerged as an independent state along with other 14 republics. However, its internal social set up, geographical location and possession of the world's third largest nuclear weapons made it center of European geopolitical attraction. Despite Ukrainian elite understanding that their state has historically struggled to define its national identity out of Russia orbit, they relied on peace process offered by Russia and security assured by the United States. Nevertheless, when geopolitical of Europe intensified with the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) to Eastwards, Ukraine was forced to give territorial concession to Russia because counterbalancing forces were not sufficient. The study aims to explore the domestic and regional complexities which made Ukraine relinquish its nuclear weapon, cooperate with Russia and then orient its policy in the direction of external balancing. And how the United States and Europe have responded Russian annexation of Crimea. The study would use the explorative and analytical methodology to examine various aspects of the Crimean crisis that defines the new low level of relations between the Ukraine and Russian on the one side and Russia and the US on another side.

**KEYWORDS**: Crimea, Nuclear Weapons, Russia, Soviet Union, North Atlantic Treaty Organization and European Union. Ukraine, United States.

# **INTRODUCTION:**

Any idea of the foreign policy would be incomplete, if it does not account for the combination of internal as well external factors in shaping the state behaviour. As neoclassical realism has also come to recognize that elite calculation and perceptions of relative power and domestic constraints as intervening variables between international pressures and state's foreign policy [¹]. In particular, the buffer state's foreign policy choices are complicated by its geographical location. The bilateral relations between Ukraine and Russia was complicated by Ukrainian quest to redefine its history, culture and diversify security and economic needs. Therefore, this article would examine the Ukrainian crisis in historical perspective in relations with Russia and the West. How domestic and international factors complicated Ukrainian security.

As in the post-independence period, Ukrainian emerged as the second largest state in Eastern Europe with a potential to become an industrial power. Further, Ukrainian location between Russia and the



European Union (EU) provided it opportunities to ripe benefits from the great powers and challenges of balancing relations between two sides. The EU and the United States are joined by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) which shares common interests to contain Russian influence to its lower limits by expanding eastwards. For Russia, friendly Ukraine was a necessary condition for its security. Therefore, Russia desired to denuclearize Ukraine

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without alienating politically. Meanwhile, the US prioritized nuclear non-Proliferation Regime (NPT) over strategic role salience of having nuclear powered Ukraine. It joined with Russia in diplomatic efforts to bring transfer of nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles from former Soviet Republics to Russia. The question then arises, could have Ukraine prevented fall of Crimea or civil war, if it had retained nuclear weapons? How would have Russia reacted, if Ukraine could have decided to retained nuclear weapons? Was it a right choice for Ukraine to initiate a shift towards western economic and military bloc when Russia had a military and strategic advantage over NATO?

### **ORIGIN OF CRISIS AND GREAT POWERS ROLE**

As we know national security is dynamic in nature. It includes military, economic, social, cultural and technological factors. If any of these factors become imbalanced, the state falls into crisis. The former Soviet Union was second to none in military power, but once the communist ideology lost its unity factor and economic became stagnant along with competition with the US, the Empire met sudden demise. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left Soviet nuclear weapons—both strategic nuclear warheads and delivery systems located on the territory of four newly independent states of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine. Moscow quickly declared itself successor of the Soviet Union and engaged with these three states to secure the return of all nuclear warheads to Russia. However, among these three states, the case of Ukraine was different. It was reluctant to give up nuclear weapons, and Russia was reluctant to recognize the independence of Ukraine.

Historically Ukraine had remained a zone of influence between great powers. Eastern Ukraine had been an integral part of the Russian Empire for centuries. Its south had been part of the Ottoman Empire until the late eighteenth century. The western had been part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth before being absorbed by the Austrian (Hapsburg) Empire in the late eighteenth century [²]. Geographically, the absence of natural border has not prevented its neighbor to intervene in its domestic affairs. In particular, Russia since the eighteenth century has dominated politically Ukraine. The Crimea was added to Ukraine in 1954 by the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to mark the 300th anniversary of Russia's acquisition of Ukraine in the Treaty of Pereyaslav [³]. Since 1954, the boundaries of the Soviet Republic of Ukraine had remained unchanged. Demographically, nearly 80 percent of the country is ethnically Ukrainian, but Russians make up the next-largest group with 17.3 percent [⁴]. Eastern Ukrainians share a strong sense of Russian heritage and the strategic port city of Sevastopol remained mostly under Russian management. Russian is spoken with more prevalence in the eastern parts of the country such as regions like Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk-all in the south and east- more than two-thirds consider Russian to be their mother tongue.

Before Ukraine, Crimean parliament declared its independence on August 24, 1991. Ukrainian parliament declared its independence from the Soviet Union on February 1992, and initiated a political dialogue with Crimea to continue the union with Kiev. The agreement with Crimea on June 1992, under Crimea was given the status of the Autonomous Republic. The agreement came into force in 1999. While, Russia came to terms with the independence of other republics of former the Soviet Union, but rejected Ukrainian claim. The Russian politicians were not ready to accept Ukrainian independence due to its historical and cultural association with the Crimea and Tuzla Island. The Russian parliament passed a resolution in May 1992 declaring the 1954 Crimea transfer illegitimate [5]. The government of Boris Yeltsin was willing to retain the Russian military control over Black Feet of Sevastopol at any cost. Given the Russian strategic interests at stake and Ukrainian quest for maintaining territorial integrity on the one side and the existence of nuclear weapons and their impact on NPT regime and balance of power in Europe on the other hand, EU and US got involved in the Ukrainian crisis.

A compromise was reached between two side under which Russia conditioned recognition of independence of Ukraine to completed transfer of nuclear in Ukrainian territory to Moscow. This move was widely supported by the US, EU and United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Ukraine was forced to transfer nuclear and strategic weapons to Russia, in exchange for political recognition and perpetual guarantees of

sovereignty and territorial integrity from European powers and the US [<sup>6</sup>]. The scholars of international politics were divided, whether Ukraine should retain nuclear weapons or cooperate with Russia and world powers. The liberal western opinion was clear that Ukraine should give up its weapons and join the NPT and should become a part of the democratic and liberal world. The realist highlighted the deterrence aspect of nuclear weapons. As John Mearsheimer made strong speculation that Ukraine could retain nuclear weapons for two reasons. First, it is imperative to maintain peace between Russia and Ukraine. That means ensuring that the Russians, who have a history of bad relations with Ukraine, do not move to reconquer it. Ukraine cannot defend itself against a nuclear-armed Russia with conventional weapons, and no state, including the United States, is going to extend to it a meaningful security guarantee. Ukrainian nuclear weapons are the only reliable deterrent to Russian aggression. If the U.S. aim is to enhance stability in Europe, the case against a nuclear-armed Ukraine is unpersuasive [<sup>7</sup>].

But the case of Ukraine was again different. These weapons did not develop under the protection of Ukrainian state, and in the absence of coordination and control system, the creation of nuclear deterrence was unreliable. These weapons were neither in authority nor the capability of Ukraine. It was Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that was making decisions. Although Ukraine has the authority, but not the capability to veto a nuclear launch decision. Second, the nuclear warheads in the territory were ICBMs (Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles) such as SS-24 and SS-19 which were built deterrence against the US. It was thus, easy for Ukraine to target the US than Russia. Third, the world powers were of the unanimous view that Ukraine should transfer its nuclear weapons to Russia and should join NPT. Thus, choosing a policy which could have to antagonize the world powers might have invited international sanctions to the already crippling economy [8].

Before putting an end to the Soviet Union on December 8, 1991, Russia initiated an idea of the post-Soviet cooperation under the banner of CIS. Eleven of 12 CIS leaders met in Kazakhstan on December 21 to discuss how the Commonwealth would function. They issued a declaration that included allied command of the military strategic forces and a single control over nuclear weapons will be preserved. , Minsk Agreement was signed on December 30, 1991, by the leaders of 11 states in which it was agreed that the Russian government would be given charge of all nuclear armaments. However, as long as the weapons remained in Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, the governments of those countries would have the right to veto their use. Ultimately, the Ukrainian military had responsibility for day-to-day missile operations, including maintenance, while receiving some 'operational planning' from the Russian strategic rocket forces command center.

Further, bilateral talks were started in September 1993, Massandra summit between Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk and Russian President Boris Yeltsin for the transfer of the strategic nuclear warheads to Russia. The deal collapsed almost immediately. The US was closely watching these bilateral talks, once it collapsed, it without waiting engaged both the parties in trilateral talks [9]. Both countries welcomed the US participation. The first trilateral meeting between diplomats took place in August 1993. Trilateral Statement was signed on January 14, 1994. Ukraine committed to full disarmament, including strategic weapons, in exchange for economic support and security assurances from the US and Russia. Ukraine agreed to transfer its nuclear warheads to Russia and accepted US assistance in dismantling missiles, bombers, and nuclear infrastructure. Ukraine's warheads would dismantled in Russia, and Ukraine would receive compensation for the commercial value of the highly enriched uranium. Ukraine ratified the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in February 1994, repealing its earlier preconditions, but it would not accede to the NPT without further security assurances [10].

To solidify security commitments to Ukraine, US, Russia, and the UK signed the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances on December 5, 1994. A political agreement by the principles of the Helsinki Accords, the memorandum included security assurances against the threat or use of force against Ukraine's territory or political independence. These countries promised to respect the sovereignty and existing borders of Ukraine. Moreover, Ukraine officially acceded to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state on the same day. That move met the final condition for ratification of the START treaty, bringing the treaty

into force for Ukraine. By June 1, 1996, Ukraine had transferred the last of the nuclear warheads on its territory to Russia for elimination. In the post-agreement period, Ukraine became one of the top recipients of the aid and foreign direct investment from US and EU. But from the national security point of view, the reception of aid from great powers is not all the story; in order to maintain its independence, it is necessary for a buffer, weak or medium power to either follow regional power or have a credible nuclear deterrence or an external alliance with a concrete security pact. Keeping in view its security, Kiev followed slow momentum towards a partnership with NATO and European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). The Ukraine-EU neighboured cooperation agreement was signed in 1994. The NATO-Ukraine Council was set up in 1997. Given the geopolitical structure of Eastern Europe, if Ukraine was in search of its national security, so was regional power of Russia in search of the regional order that would be Moscow centric. Thus, the strategic interests of Russia and security interests of Ukraine were moving towards the opposite direction.

Russia own economic interests were moving towards global capitalism, but its strategic interests were continue governed by the Soviet era thinking. As Russia recovered from the ashes of the Soviet Union as the second most military power state on earth and a leading player in global arms and energy market, it began to perform regional power state and demanded cooperation from neighbourhood [11]. The EU on its part launched an ambitious policy of European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to engage Eastern European countries in trade, science and technology, and nuclear energy cooperation. The EU-Ukraine Partnership and Cooperation Agreement were signed in 1994 which entered into force in 1998. The first round of NATO enlargement on Eastern Europe took place in 1999 when Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland became its members. However, the relationship between Russia and NATO remained working as both came to perceive shared interests to deal with radical Islamists in Central Asia. Russia extended cooperated to the US in Afghanistan. The NATO-Russia Council was created in 2002. The friendly gesture served Russian interests as it was fighting its internal war with Muslim separatists in Chechnya, a tiny, oil-rich province in the North Caucasus region that had declared independence in 1999 [12]. Earlier West was criticizing Russia for undermining the democratic freedoms and using disproportionate force, the tactical support to the US in Afghanistan was the answer to this challenge.

The geopolitical game change plan for Eastern Europe came in 2004 when NATO further expanded its membership to Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia on the one side and EU brought closer Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus on the other side. For Russia expansions of NATO and EU meant the policy of complete encirclement of Russian borders by US military and attempts to disintegrate CIS. In realist theory terminology, the regional power Russia was witnessing challenge to its core interests and came to perceive its weak economic capabilities were exploited by economically powerful NATO-EU alliance. Georgia and Ukraine were drawn the "red line" for the eastern expansion of the NATO. As Mearsheimer said, "Georgia's and Ukraine's membership in the alliance is a huge strategic mistake which would have most serious consequences for pan European security." Putin maintained that admitting those two countries would represent a 'direct threat' to Russia" [13]. When NATO was busy in collaboration with Georgia, Russia established direct contacts with separatists of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in support of their universal right of independence. Russia officially recognized both South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states on August 26, 2008.

While Ukraine for two decades acted as a buffer between Russia and NATO but changing internal dynamics in Ukraine resulted in people in the western part voiced for alignment of Ukraine with the West. This would mean NATO will be 425 kilometers from Moscow and can cut off Russia from the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, and squeeze it out of the Caucasus. When in March 2014 lobbying was going on in Ukrainian parliament to pass the agreement of association with EU, the Russian government offered an alternative plan for Ukraine. It also showed willingness for a trilateral trade agreement between Russia, Ukraine, and EU. Again, when pro-European faction pressurized the Ukrainian government, Russia developed links with pro-Russian groups. In 2013, a survey of Crimea, it was found that 53 percent would choose an economic union with CIS and just 17 percent preferred the EU, if just one arrangement was allowed [14]. Given the ethnic and linguistic majority of the pro-Russian population in eastern Ukraine an

opposite force emerged in Ukraine which ended with a controversial referendum of Crimea on March 16, 2014, in which majority preferred to join Russia and in a subsequent period civil war like situations emerged in major parts of eastern Ukraine. The West blamed Russian president Putin was driven by territorial expansion vision and Russia argued that the taproot of the current crisis was NATO expansion into the backyard of Moscow.

In this context, the question that draws international attention was how a buffer state should devise its foreign policy. Is stability of buffer state dependent on the balance of power between the two regional powers or internal cohesion of the buffer state. From the hegemonic perspective, a regional nuclear power would not allow emerging nuclear deterrence in the region; this has been the policy of Israel in the Middle East. Since Ukraine was in possession of nuclear weapons at the time of its independence, the neoclassical argument was Ukraine exists between Russia and NATO, and European balance of power could not protect Ukraine from Russian threat. It must have retained its nuclear weapons. The neorealist rationale has called by Maria Rost Rublee (2015) a counterfactual fantasy [15]. He argues that this assumption has numerous technical, political and strategic flaws. Crimea historically and culturally has important links with Russia than Ukraine. "Even in the absence of Russian intervention, Ukraine had limited influence over Crimea. Had if Ukraine attempted to keep the Soviet nuclear arsenal for its military purposes, Crimea most likely would have been annexed by Russia long before 2014 or long before it tried to build second strike capabilities" [16]. He argues that this assumption has numerous technical, political and strategic flaws. Crimea historically and culturally has important links with Russia than Ukraine. "Even in the absence of Russian intervention, Ukraine had limited influence over Crimea. Had if Ukraine attempted to keep the Soviet nuclear arsenal for its military purposes, Crimea most likely would have been annexed by Russia long before 2014 or long before it tried to build second strike capabilities" [17].

Similarly, before ending the apartheid regime in South Africa, the government gave up nuclear weapons which could be attributed to both the end of Cold War as well as white minority unwillingness to give nuclear weapons to the black majority. Simailarly, Ukraine's domestic politics in particular fragmented social structure and identity played a role in defining Ukrainian foreign policy and nuclear policy. The public support for retaining nuclear arsenal increased from 18 percent in May 1992 to 45 percent in the summer of 1993 which showed there was lack of overwhelming national consensus on both nuclear policy and threat perception [18].

As already mentioned Russia did not recognize the separate existence of Ukraine, while Ukrainian political elite was trying to reverse this history. The Ukrainian elite saw accession to NPT was seen as mean in early 1990 to get global powers recognition and as use legal sovereign state status a way of separating itself from the Soviet. Taras Kuzio (1998) argued Ukraine in the post-Soviet period was a quasi-state and inherited a quasi-nation [<sup>19</sup>]. Ukraine was not an unusual nation either within the former Soviet Union or the Third World. It does possess juridical statehood while as yet disclosing little evidence of empirical statehood. Domestic factors prevented a continuation of maximalist policy, and it looked for security in Western Europe which had moved to post-nation state system while Ukraine had yet to achieve nation-building project. Thus, Ukraine's aim to integrating into Europe and not Eurasia has been driven by its elite quest to achieve military, political, economic and even cultural identity independent from Russian history. Whereas the anti-Russian sentiments are confined to a minority ethnic Ukraine's population and lack of overall public hostility to Russia is reflected in the weak public support for those political parties which call for a total break from Moscow as the solution to Ukraine's economic crisis [<sup>20</sup>]. Thus, there was possibility that Russia might had used the internal ethnic fault lines of Ukrainian society, if it had not cooperated with Russia.

# **ANALYSIS**

Once Ukraine realised that there was no world power willing provide initial support for transforming its nuclear possession into nuclear deterrence, the more logical choice before it was to form institutional balancing against Russian hegemony than relying on external balancing. After all Ukraine emerged as a second largest economy in the Eastern Europe after Russia, it could have joined with other states of CIS and

Russia and created a regional structure of security based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. Second, the state in a transition stage of nation building lacks industrial infrastructure and scientific expertise to build or manage the nuclear weapons. The implications of this account is that a state might be able to buy nuclear weapons, but cannot make it functional until it has its own national experience in operating nuclear and missile program. Third, when, US and EU came in support of Ukraine to silence the pro-Russian forces revolt and imposed sanctions against Russia and in retaliation Russia imposed counter sanctions. The NATO undermined the Russian military capacity. Russian counter move, was impressive even mighty Soviet Union could not do it. For the first time eastern Mediterranean country did not challenged Russian military campaign in Syria. Turkey initially was uncomfortable with Russia, but later joined Russian Syrian sponsored peace process. The fallout of this action was Turkey, Iran, Israel and even GCC countries recognized Russian geopolitical weight. Thus, when a great power opens one front against other great power in retaliation other opens second front. Russia has showed US it too possesses capabilities to undertake military adventurism in other parts of the world. And Russia holds a considerable level of influence over North Korea and Iran with which US has issues. Fourth, in the post-Cold War period, NATO has enlarged and presently there are twelve eastern and central European states its members. The NATO has also built partnership with rest of states which includes Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Macedonia. Russia on the other hand, has no natural borders to defend its frontier from European threat and historically has relied on expansion to increase its strategic depth. The security interests and historical hegemonic role of Russia over Eastern Europe from Russian point of view has undermined by US and EU. Once Russia began to recover from the shock of Soviet disintegration, it prioritised both CIS and Eurasian Union. The decision of Georgia in 2008 to leave Custom Union and Ukrainian efforts to join EU and NATO was seen as Euro-Atlantic alliance efforts to break last defence line of Russia. When Ukrainian protesters in streets were making cause for integration with EU, Russia offered 15 billion of loans in 2013 to support Ukraine to repair its slowing economy. The deal also includes lowering the price for Russian gas deliveries to Ukraine pays by about a third [21]. And when Russia recognized diplomacy is not working, it used military power to punish Ukraine as it did with Georgia. Thus, it indicates that Russia has witnessed withering soft power influence showed willingness to take high cost risk to defend its interests. Fifth, in the post-1990s period there was a kind of Cold peace between Western Europe and Russia, which was marked by strong bilateral trade relations of Russia with individual states of EU. When Russia annexed Crimea, Europe was unwilling to raise Russia's perceived costs of non-compliance and their individual and collective efforts were insufficient to reverse Russian intervention in Ukraine. Sixth, there is a support for Russian protection in Ukrainian but not territorial annexation. The majority of eastern Ukraine supports the idea of an independent Ukraine, but disapproves certain policies of their government. Therefore, both Russia and EU should play a constructive role in resolving Ukrainian crisis and support its territorial integrity.

# CONCLUSION

As the end of one crisis gives birth to another, the fall of Soviet Union was followed by expansion of EU and NATO towards the Eastern Europe with which emerging power Russia expressed sense of being encircled. When the West came to support of Ukraine's enthusiasm for European integration, Russia response was redline had been crossed. The fall out of which was civil war and secession of Crimea from Ukraine. The US, however, perceived Russian annexation of Crimean from point view of its impact on long held US commitment to support territorial sovereignty and territorial status quo than on European geopolitics. The US since 1945 has invested heavily on convincing and coercing states to respect territorial integrity of each other. "The US position was that it was not acceptable for one country to change the borders of another by force. It was not lawful for one sovereignty to dictate to another which countries or organizations it may associate with. It was not all right for Russia to decide Ukraine's future" [22]. The US responded by increasing the size of the NATO Response Force by threefold to 4,000 troops to defend the Baltic States and Poland [23]. The Trump administration has also decided to arm Ukraine which includes the supply of Javelin anti-tank missiles and sniper rifles. Both sides downgraded the diplomatic relations

between Russia and the West. Thus, the Ukrainian crisis has unfolded a new crisis in Europe and in Russia-US relations. It has questioned the Ukrainian imagination of a nation state. It has questioned the Russian ability to perform a hegemonic role in the region. Russia's own relatively weak economic performance has reduced the prospect of Eurasia Union to attract neighborhood. Third, when Russia and NATO began to compete for changing the equation in the buffer zone, it was Russian proximity with Ukraine that dominates the geopolitics and NATO reacted in the form of sanctions. The spillover effect of Ukrainian internal fragmentation and great power strategic interest clash contributed to the possible emergence of the new Cold War between Russia and the US.

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Mumtaz Ahmad Shah
PhD Research Scholar, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Humanities and Social
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