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The Ukrainian Crisis: Is It Over?

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On April 17, 2014, the foreign ministers of all the parties involved in the Ukrainian crisis – Russia, Ukraine, the US, and the European Union – met in Geneva. The purpose of the meeting was to resolve the escalating crisis in Ukraine, which has evolved into a significant confrontation between the global powers.

Preceding the meeting of the foreign ministers was a series of events that followed the violent change of regime in Ukraine, which Russia believed was supported by the West. Russia's quite effective response, the takeover and annexation of the Crimean peninsula, was followed by protests, led by pro-Russian groups, against the authorities in southeastern Ukraine. These developments, which threatened to escalate into an all-out civil war, occurred with Russian support, if not instigation. In demonstrative fashion Russia also concentrated forces on its border with Ukraine in preparation for an invasion, with the possible goal of cutting off additional areas of Ukraine, or even occupying the entire country. These were the concerns besetting the international system in general and the Ukrainians in particular. In tandem, Russia has increased its activity in the Middle East, sending threatening messages against the West and posing new challenges in this arena as well, while in effect defining it as another front in addition to Eastern Europe in the conflict between the powers.

This chain of events in both Eastern Europe and the Middle East, which Russia appears to have synchronized well, is likely what prompted the Ukrainian-Western party, now operating as an integrated apparatus, to discuss the future of Ukraine with Russia. Russia's willingness to engage in this dialogue was based on the recent Russian claims, which beyond denying the legitimacy of the current Ukrainian government and demanding restoration of the previous situation, reflect its willingness to reach understandings on the basis of two fundamental conditions: one, the conversion of Ukraine into a federal state, thereby establishing a base for its future dissolution, and two, the exclusion of Ukraine from the networks of Western organizations. Russia thereby expressed its wish to be compensated for the damage that it suffered when Ukraine abandoned the Russian sphere of influence and proved unwilling to join the Moscow-led

efforts to form a Euro-Asian union, i.e., to re-establish the Russian Empire. As far as Russia is concerned, it is clear that it was Western support, headed by the US, that made Ukraine's behavior possible. Russia, which feels that the current situation is to its disadvantage, therefore wishes to reach a solution that it regards as acceptable through direct dialogue with the US. It appears that US realization of this Russian posture became the basis for the meeting in Geneva.

The meeting, which in effect was a Russian-US dialogue, was described as successful. At its conclusion, an announcement was issued couched in fairly general terms, yet behind it lay matters of principle essential to the Russian side, which was apparently the Russia's reason for participating in the conference. The announcement called on the parties to disband all their unofficial armed frameworks and to restore the status quo ante, while withdrawing from all the facilities seized during the disturbances. However, it also mentioned a call to the Ukrainian parliament to undertake broad constitutional reform, meaning the creation of a basis for turning Ukraine into a federal state. Following the meeting and the published announcement, Russia made its further cooperation with Ukraine and the West contingent on the granting of extensive authority to the various districts in Ukraine. In effect, this authority makes the secession of these districts from Ukraine possible at any future time.

Another point of principle not mentioned in the announcement, but clarified by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and Kremlin press spokesman Peskov, concerns Ukraine's neutral international status, i.e., its refraining from joining any international framework, with an emphasis on NATO.

The significance of these understandings is that Ukraine is in effect becoming a neutral country and is under ongoing threat of disintegration due to its designated federal structure, intended to ensure that it will not deviate from these understandings.

The main Russian goal at this meeting concerning the future of Ukraine was thereby achieved. The results of the contacts between the parties, which as of now are taking charge of the situation, were presumably made possible through the granting of certain advantages to each of the parties and achieving a win-win situation of sorts, in which Ukraine, with Western backing, is disconnecting itself from the Russian sphere of influence with a view to its future integration in the Western system. Russia, which was able to exert quite effective pressure in the region itself and in the international system, including the Middle East, managed to compensate for some of the damage it suffered by preventing Ukraine's accession to the Western bloc, with an emphasis on NATO, and by creating a threat of Ukraine's dissolution. In other words, Ukraine is becoming an internationally neutral party between Russia and the West with the status of a Russian

hostage should it not fulfill this commitment. The current status quo is approved, while in the very agreement on the contents of the announcement and the readiness for continued cooperation, Russia recognizes the legitimacy of the new Ukrainian regime, and Ukraine recognizes the Russian annexation of Crimea.

To date it is uncertain whether the Ukrainian crisis has been solved and the parties will completely observe the terms of the agreement. In any case, beyond the fact that the conflict between Russia and the West is at its height and is taking center stage on the international agenda, it is premature to characterize the developments in that part of the world definitively. It appears that although Russia has succeeded for now in preventing Ukraine's desertion to the rival camp, it has also lost Ukraine as a partner for its geopolitical plans in the Euro-Asian sphere. In that sense, Russia has been a loser in the crisis.

Even though it thus appears that a compromise formula was found for quieting the situation, it is reasonable to assume that Russia will not accept the status quo for long, as it is highly interested in continuing the consolidation of its geopolitical plans, at least in its historic sphere of influence. Similarly, the emerging consequences of these developments for the conflict between the powers in the international theater and the Middle East should not be ignored.

