

Russia, Ukrainian separatists & Malaysian Flight MH-17: Changing the tide of Russia's resurgence?

By John Bruni

Vladimir Putin's stunning stratagem of capturing the former Russian province of Crimea (March 21, 2014) from the Ukraine, which caught the Americans and the Europeans flat-footed, led Moscow to the strategic gamble of supporting pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. The motive? To acquire the industrial heartland of eastern Ukraine by proxy, or, at the very least, 'finlandise'¹ this part of the country so that it could not be used by a pro-Western government in Kiev as a springboard for covert activity against the Russian Federation. Though the idea may have been sound, the execution lacked the finesse of the Russian operation in Crimea.



¹ To cause a country to accommodate the foreign policy wishes of another in order to maintain its sovereignty. The term originated when the USSR put pressure on Finland during the Cold War which made that country a neutral albeit 'Soviet compliant' state.

In the beginning (March 2014), Ukrainian separatists and a succession of pro-Russian uprisings among the east Ukrainian cities, successfully dislodged Ukrainian government forces from a sizeable part of the eastern parts of the country. Following the Crimea victory there was the very real prospect that the eastern parts of Ukraine would successfully become independent states with the very high likelihood of joining the Russian Federation. Western economic and diplomatic pressure against Moscow put paid to this. A round of international sanctions on Moscow, targeting officials and businesses close to the President of Russia, reminded the Kremlin that while some may have thought that Russia had a degree of autonomy when it came to administering matters close to home, the ties that bind Russia to the international community could not be ignored for long.

Russian billionaires started bleeding money. President Putin's continuing political power was and is dependent on the Russian financial elite. This includes ensuring that those people have free access to international markets. And while for the most part, they, more than the financial elite of other countries, are inclined to rally around the flag and 'take one' for the national team, they too have their limits. At what point this influential and cashed-up support base will allow itself to take even more hits to its financial 'bottom-line' for the geopolitical games being played by President Putin and his political circle, is anyone's guess. But the fact that Putin

agreed to support an Easter truce, brokered by Russia, Ukraine, the US and the EU in Geneva on April 10, may have indicated that his desire to support eastern Ukrainian independence was waning. It was hoped that the Easter truce would form the basis for a more lasting peace agreement between Kiev and the self-proclaimed people's republics in eastern Ukraine.² Kiev, however, put paid to that notion. Buoyed by the support of the West, which did not believe in the legitimacy of claims to eastern Ukrainian independence, 'agents of Kiev'³ allegedly fired the shots that broke the truce and launched an all-out Ukrainian offensive against rebel strongholds. The Ukrainian government offensive has been successful and has significantly reduced the area of Ukraine that was under the control of the separatists. While Russia supported the arming and training of pro-Russian separatists, its enduring commitment to them began to evaporate. Since the Easter truce, the separatists have been fighting on their own, suffering a string of setbacks. Faced with the prospect that the Russian financial elite may turn against him, Putin, forever the pragmatist, could not let the Russian economy be exposed to more damage because of his support for Ukrainian separatists.

Then MH-17 happened. The shoot-down of the doomed Malaysian Airlines flight MH-

² The Donetsk People's Republic, proclaimed April 7 and led by Prime Minister Alexander Borodai; the Lugansk People's Republic, proclaimed April 27 and led by Prime Minister Marat Bashirov.

³ The Right Sector Ukrainian nationalist group.

17 took place as a consequence of a complex sequence of events. On the ground a Ukrainian government offensive was taking place. Ukrainian separatist forces, essentially a rag-tag group of militiamen, were on the defence. In the air, Ukrainian fighters, (SU-27 Flankers) were circling ahead, a sign that Ukrainian military transports were on the move. Separatists have had some success in shooting down Ukrainian military aircraft, and as the tide was turning against them on the ground, armed with Soviet era man-portable and sophisticated tracked surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries (either captured from Ukrainian military stocks, or supplied to them from Russian sources), they could claim a degree of competence, (but not professionalism), in the use of anti-aircraft weaponry. The fatal shot that brought down



MH-17 might well have been a tragic mistake. The reaction of Ukrainian separatists, however, by not unilaterally declaring an exclusion

zone around the aircraft wreckage and even admitting fault (if indeed it was them who fired the shot) has done their cause no favours. The problem for Moscow is that pro-Russian militiamen have been supported by the Kremlin, and perhaps unfairly, this has placed the Russian government squarely in the sights of the international community. If ever there was a time for Putin to cut any perception of support for the Ukrainian separatists, it is now. The fact that the Russian government did not veto calls from

the UN Security Council to investigate the causes into the tragedy that is MH-17, demonstrates a Russian climb-down. It might indeed signal that Putin will walk away from eastern Ukraine and let Kiev resume control over its entire national territory – for now. Eastern Ukraine will be Kiev’s problem, and reintegration will present Kiev with multiple political problems.



It is unlikely that Russian nationalists in Moscow or eastern Ukraine will be happy with this situation. Flush from the victory of Crimea, they craved another victory and saw eastern Ukraine as the next domino to fall to Russian power. Robbed of this, Russian nationalists, and here we have to distinguish that Russian nationalists may in fact be private individuals and not connected in any way to the Russian government, may attempt in time to turn the eastern Ukraine into a larger version of Northern Ireland, destabilising the Ukraine well into the future. Kiev’s response to this sort of slow-burning insurgency will test the longevity of Western support and its current state of perceived ‘political virtue’.

– Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International –

Images Accessed: 22/07/2014

Ukrainian pro-Russian militiamen

http://images.says.com/uploads/story_source/source_image/322048/88fa.jpg

Buk/SA-11 Gadfly Surface-to-Air Missile Battery

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a8/Buk-M1-2_9A310M1-2.jpg

Malaysian Flight MH-17

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/linkableblob/5608828/data/an-mh17-crash-site-data.jpg>