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Is the Ukrainian Crisis Really Over?

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On September 5, 2014, following conflicting statements and concomitant with the NATO summit in Wales on sanctions against Russia, a ceasefire agreement to end the fighting in Ukraine was signed in Minsk. Notwithstanding doubts from various directions, the arrangement went into effect, and thus far is holding. The agreement, signed by a negotiating team composed of representatives from Russia, Ukraine, the separatist districts, and the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, is purely a ceasefire agreement; it does not constitute a final settlement of the Ukrainian crisis. The agreement has 12 sections on ceasefire terms, including a freeze of the current situation on the ground, withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front line, a prisoner exchange, humanitarian aid to the conflict region, and the stationing of international supervisors on behalf of OSCE. The agreement does not address political aspects, which will be discussed separately in a political dialogue to achieve a permanent settlement.

The Russian-Ukrainian crisis has taken 2,600 lives, occupied the international agenda for a prolonged period, deepened the conflict between Russia and the West, and heightened anxiety about general international stability. The prevailing opinion is that an agreement and end to the crisis are essential for Russia, due both to the political and economic difficulty it has in withstanding a prolonged conflict against the West, and its decided interest in preventing additional Western sanctions, which were about to take immediate effect. NATO believes that the recently formulated means of exerting pressure on Russia was the factor that led Russia to agree to a ceasefire. It appears that the punitive measures prepared will be suspended for the moment, although the Western camp is not united on this point.

Indeed, in the background, growing Western threats are emerging, sounded particularly at the NATO summit, on ways of containing Russian involvement in Ukraine. Eastern European countries, many of which are new members of the European Union and NATO and seek a tougher Western policy against Russia, are increasingly sensitive to the Russian threat. Responses to Russia were discussed at the summit, including new sanctions (the previous sanctions, imposed at the beginning of the crisis, were ineffective)

and a military response, comprising a permanent presence of NATO forces in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic republics, and the establishment of a rapid response force (limited to 4,000 troops).

The current crisis has been marked by several months of fighting in eastern Ukraine, following Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the declaration of independence by the separatist districts in eastern Ukraine. These hostile acts began after understandings were reached in talks in April 2014 but were not implemented. When Poroshenko was elected president of Ukraine in May, he began a campaign to defeat the separatist districts. Despite some successes by the Ukrainian security forces, the situation changed following a counterattack by separatist forces that began on August 24, 2014 and defeated the Ukrainian army. This is also the reason behind the increased Western pressure on Russia, whose role in this fighting was quite clear.

Indeed, it appears that Russia, behind its political backing in the separatist districts, was actively involved in the fighting in restrained and camouflaged fashion that did not allow easy recognition of its signature. This quite effective campaign, conducted using asymmetric methods, which NATO called "hybrid warfare," drew strong international criticism. Russia has consistently denied its involvement, in part in order to avoid paying a higher price for the crisis, including the substantial Western sanctions.

Russia believes that its involvement in the current Ukraine crisis is a result of Western geopolitical pressure on Russian spheres of interest. Russia feels itself the principal victim of the process underway in Ukraine, and regards its own policy as a response to what it perceives as an existential threat to its interests. Russia perceives a Western challenge, designed, as it believes, to disrupt its plans, while dislodging it from its positions in the post-Soviet arena and containing its aspirations to regain superpower status, together with subversive activity designed to destabilize it internally. In Russia's view, these are basic elements in US and NATO policy aimed at achieving the West's desirable world order. In response to these challenges, the Russian government has elected to pursue an assertive foreign policy, combined with an autocratic internal policy. In this context, Russia has designed its solution to its challenges in the form of a renewed union of former Soviet countries, the "Eurasian Union," in which an important place is reserved for Ukraine.

The policy adopted by Russia since the internal revolution in Ukraine sought a union with the Western frameworks was designed to prevent Ukraine from moving westward and keeping it within the Russian sphere of influence. This activity was rapidly transformed into an international crisis, with the leading powers on opposite sides. The model solution sought by Russia emerged during the crisis: the forming of separatist districts, which in Russia's view will remain part of Ukraine, but which will win extensive autonomy and maintain Russia's presence and influence. As a result, these areas will become a means of

exerting pressure on Ukraine and preventing its joining the Western frameworks, or at least pave the way for a future restoration of Russian influence by means of subversive activity on Ukrainian territory. It appears that Russia will succeed, more or less, in pushing this model forward in the expected political dialogue.

However, even if the desired settlement, assuming it is achieved, enables Russia to exert pressure on Ukraine and the West, this will not be enough to restore the previous situation. What is emerging is that Russia's achievement in promoting its essential interests in Ukraine's eastern districts is nothing more than defeat in the war over Ukraine as a whole, which is looking westward – notwithstanding the loss of Crimea and the damage to its status in the separatist districts – and will remain outside the Russian sphere of influence.

It therefore appears that despite the emerging agreement, the conflict over the regional arrangement promoted by Russia has not come to an end. Russia will not accept the situation, and will continue to take action to change the new situation. As a result, no lull in this global conflict now underway should be expected.

Where Israel and the Middle East are concerned, an overall context has been created between the two regional crises: Europe and the Middle East have become two simultaneous loci of conflict in the global campaign. Israel's policy in the Ukrainian crisis featured a neutral position, withstanding Western pressure to join in the general criticism of Russia. Beyond the array of basic interests behind this policy, Israel benefited from a restrained Russian policy towards it during Operation Protective Edge. It appears that this policy has proved itself, and it is therefore preferable for Israel to maintain it at present, without prejudice to its strategic partnership with the US.

