

A Quiet Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis

By Mikio Haruna



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Developments in Ukraine following the political upheaval in February 2014 continue to affect international relations. After anti-government protests culminated in the fall of President Viktor Yanukovich's administration and the formation of a pro-Western interim government, Russia sent its special operation forces, Spetsnaz, to recapture the strategically important Crimean Peninsula. And with the declaration of a sovereign and independent Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Russia effectively annexed the region as Russian territory. Ukraine is still facing uprisings and riots by ethnic Russian residents in the eastern and southern regions secretly supported by Russia, and many have occupied government buildings.

Even after the newly elected President Petro Poroshenko's government started, the situation in Ukraine, thus, remains tumultuous. It is the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union ended the Cold War that a specific region of a former Soviet republic has broken away and declared independence, effectively being annexed to Russia.

The Western bloc, including the United States, Western Europe, and Japan, has expressed grave concern over the situation and has imposed economic sanctions against Russia. In response, Russia deployed more than 50,000 troops around the Ukrainian border and has been backing pro-Russian movements inside Ukraine. This has led to continued confrontation between the US and Russia, and there is currently no sign of a resolution to this situation.

This paper will analyze whether the world is entering a new Cold War era, how China will respond to the Ukrainian situation, what kind of impact the Ukrainian problem will have on East Asia, and how Japan should address the issue.

Nuclear Weapons & Crimea as a Strategic Fortress

Geopolitically, Ukraine resembles the Korean Peninsula in East Asia. Just as North Korea serves as a "buffer zone" to China, the Crimean Peninsula is a strategic "buffer zone" located between Russia and Western Europe. The Crimean Peninsula, in particular, embraces the military port of Sevastopol, one of the best natural harbors overlooking the Black Sea and giving it access to the Mediterranean.

The Crimean Peninsula has historically been a key arena of international politics. In 1783 it was annexed by the Russia Empire following the war against the Ottoman Turks, and was the main battleground of the Crimean War (1853-1856) in which Russia fought against British, French and Turkish forces. In 1954, to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Russia's annexation of Ukraine, then First Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea to Ukraine without discussions, a decision that allegedly owed greatly to the fact that his first wife was a Ukrainian woman.

But in 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed, the Cold War between the East and the West ended, and Ukraine became independent. The biggest concerns for an independent Ukraine now were the fate of an estimated 1,800 nuclear warheads (*Wall Street Journal*, March 19,

2014) and whether Russia or Ukraine should have jurisdiction over the harbor of Sevastopol, the home port of the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

During the former Soviet Union days, nuclear weapons were manufactured in Ukrainian military factories, and these weapons remained in Ukraine even after its independence. According to an estimate by the Nuclear Threat Initiative, a private US research institute, 176 former Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles were present in Ukraine at the time of independence (<http://www.nti.org>).

Ukraine was initially reluctant to hand over the nuclear weapons. But the US, Russia and the United Kingdom convinced Ukraine to transfer them to Russia, in exchange for the "Budapest Memorandum", ratified in 1994, aimed at guaranteeing the national and territorial security of Ukraine. The recent annexing of Crimea clearly violates the Memorandum. In any event, this is how the remaining nuclear weapons were transported from Ukraine.

The more serious issue was sovereignty of the Crimean Peninsula, a strategic point for Russia. After heated political battles, Russia has managed to successfully maintain its military bases in Crimea, using supply of natural gas as leverage to secure Russian interests.

The second president of post-independent Ukraine, the pro-Russian Leonid Kuchma, signed an agreement in 1997 to loan the military bases in Crimea to Russia for 20 years. In 2004, the "Orange

Revolution” which sought Western-style democratization began, and the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko won the re-run presidential election. But the pro-Russian Yanukovich won the 2010 election, and under his government the arrangement to loan the bases to Russia was extended to 2042.

However, in late 2013 the fight to drag down the corrupt Yanukovich government began to heat up and after bloody demonstrations by pro-Western citizens the government collapsed, and things took a drastic turn. In the end, the hard-line policies of Putin allowed Russia to secure control of the military bases on the Crimean Peninsula.

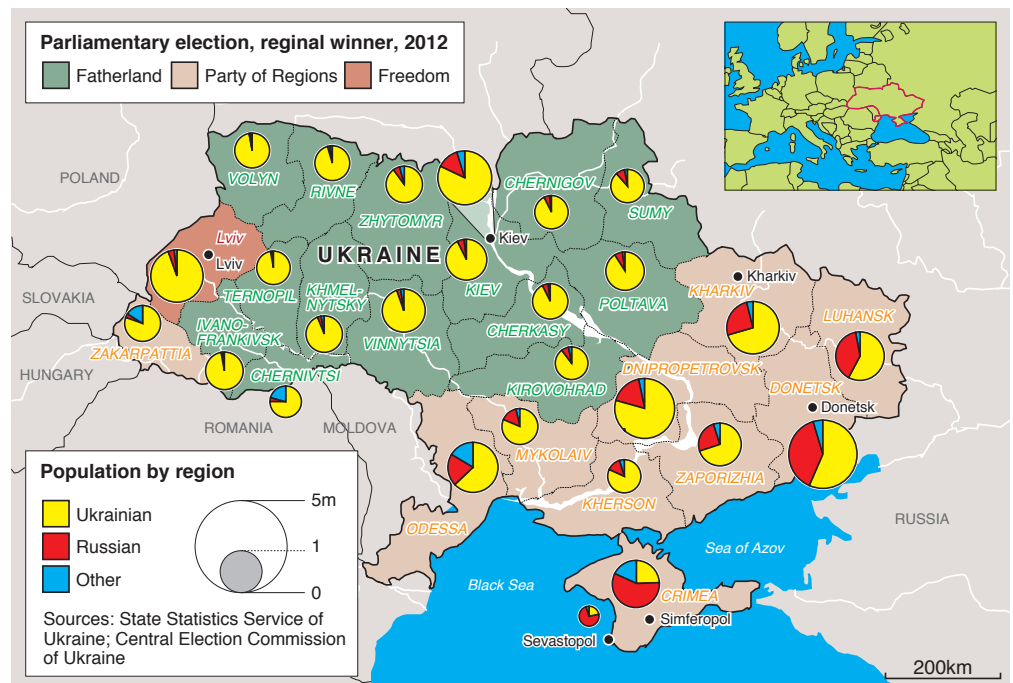
To justify Russia’s annexation of the peninsula, Putin spoke of the “illegitimacy” of the way the Yanukovich administration was overthrown and claimed the right of “self-determination” for the ethnic Russians living there, who make up 60% of the population.

But in reality, Russia was most certainly looking at maintaining a gateway to the Mediterranean Sea, and a home port for its Black Sea Fleet, with which it seeks to impress its influence over a wide area of the Middle East and Africa. Russia’s ally Syria, for example, has been asking for continued Russian support for the regime of President Bashar Hafez al-Assad. The Russian people are largely behind Putin’s assertive strategy to revive Russia as a superpower, with polls showing 80% public support.

Stalin’s “Divide and Rule”

US intelligence authorities submit the “Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community” to Congress every year. The first report under the administration of President Barack Obama in 2009 touched upon the Russian “challenge”, but this was not described as a “threat” to the US. Since the terrorist attacks on the US on Sept.

Map of Ukraine with pie charts showing ethnic populations of each state, and coloring of states showing the majority political party after the 2012 general election



Source: Compiled by author referring to *The Economist* (March 1, 2014)

11, 2001, the US has identified the greatest threat as being Islamic terrorists and paid little attention to political developments in Russia and Ukraine, and this led to the delayed US reaction and subsequent lack of a comprehensive response to the current crisis.

Russia’s annexing of the Crimean Peninsula also presented a grave security threat to Europe. It cannot be overlooked that since the 1990s Russia has supported the following four pro-independence civil movements by minority ethnic Russians in former Soviet republics:

- (1) In 1990, ethnic Russians broke away from the Republic of Moldova to become the independent state of the “Dniestr Republic”
- (2) In 1991, ethnic Armenians broke away from the Republic of Azerbaijan to become the independent state of the “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic”
- (3) In 2008, ethnic Russians broke away from Georgia to become the independent state of the “Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia”



Photo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan

Russian President Vladimir Putin & Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe meet for talks on Feb. 8, 2014 in Sochi during Abe's visit to attend the Opening Ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games.

(4) In 2008, ethnic Russians broke away from Georgia to become the independent state of “South Ossetia”.

Annexing the Crimean Peninsula is actually an addition to the above four developments. But the West had, thus far, deliberately taken an observatory approach to the situation and had not intervened.

What lies behind all five developments is Josef Stalin’s “Divide and Rule” policy, which tactfully played on the ethnic Russian minorities’ desire to break away and become independent. Stalin placed ethnic minorities in all of the 15 republics that made up the former Soviet Union, and used them to prevent the heightening of nationalism in each republic (see “Russia’s Latest Land Grab” by Jeffrey Mankoff, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014). After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many of the republics saw ethnic conflicts arise, but Russia manipulated these conflicts to successfully exert its influence.

Failure to Predict Putin’s Invasion

The US intelligence community is yet again haunted by the notion that “Putin has played his game again.” It is said that neither the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) nor the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) were able to predict the invasion by Russian troops of the Crimean Peninsula, even one day before March 1 when Russia effectively seized it.

On Feb. 27, the closed sessions of the House and Senate Select Committees on Intelligence invited analysts from the CIA and DIA to give briefings on the Ukrainian situation. But the DIA assessed that

“Russian troops held a military exercise near the Ukrainian border with 150,000 forces, but (Russia) will not deploy them to invade Crimea”. The CIA is also said to have assessed that “while there are signs of a Russian intervention, it is not predicted.” According to the *Wall Street Journal*, even on Feb. 28, the DIA still concluded that “there will be no movement within the next 24 hours.” The CIA was more careful and ambiguous and simply stated that a Russian invasion might be possible.

Behind these failures there was the big shift in priorities for US intelligence activities with the end of the Cold War, especially after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, and the fact that the US had placed priority on anti-terrorist activities. This prioritization shift played against the US, and a former CIA official said in an interview to the *Chicago Tribune* that the Kiev office of the CIA “never had more than two or three case officers (CIA career officers).”

Putin, a former KGB spy, used this lack of interest in Russian affairs by the US intelligence agencies to his advantage and boosted his reputation. David Ignatius, a columnist with *The Washington Post* and an expert on US intelligence agencies, saw this as Putin stealing the methods that the administration of President Ronald Reagan used in carrying out anti-Soviet covert operations in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola and Poland, rather than directly confronting the Soviet Union (*Washington Post*, April 9, 2014). Michael Gordon, a military correspondent with *The New York Times*, also noted that Putin had skillfully employed 21st century style war tactics, deploying Spetsnaz, taking military control of key facilities, shutting down Ukrainian military telephone lines, and instigating cyber-attacks, all very swiftly carried out to give little chance for the US to realize what was happening (*New York Times*, April 21, 2014).

As Obama later pointed out, Putin had in fact acted out of “weakness” for fear of losing a pro-Russia Ukraine, but it is also true that it gave the world the illusion that Russia was leading the situation.

China Loses “Ukrainian Armory”

On the outlook for the situation, some expressed concerns over imposing sanctions that are too strict as it may result in the strengthening of China-Russian relations. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is believed to have referred to this very concern at the G7 Summit in the Netherlands in early April 2014.

There are, however, long-standing differences between Russia and China, and China has, in fact, been receiving former Soviet high-tech weapons from Ukraine without their being regulated by Russia. For

the past 20 or more years, Ukraine has been a supplier of important high-tech military technology to China (see, for example, “Inside China: Why Putin’s intervention in Ukraine is bad news for China” by Miles Yu, *The Washington Times*, March 13, 2014). During the Soviet Union years, roughly 30% of Soviet weapons were manufactured in Ukraine. After its collapse in 1991, weapon technologies were kept in independent Ukraine.

The “Yuzhmash” machine building plant in the state of Dnepropetrovsk in Eastern Ukraine produced the first Soviet SS-3 nuclear missiles and SS-7 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) as well as space rockets and satellites. Production of ICBMs ceased after independence, but the workforce in the military industry is still believed to be over 10,000 people.

Of the former Soviet Union’s six shipbuilding yards, three were located in Ukraine and various naval vessels were being built in these shipyards, including frigates, destroyers, nuclear-powered cruisers, and aircraft carriers. China’s first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, was originally the Ukrainian carrier *Varyag*, while its largest open ocean depot ship *Qinghai Lake* was also built in Ukraine, which has played a large role in the rapid modernization of the Chinese navy’s military equipment. The origin of China’s technologies for manned spacecraft remains unknown, but it is highly probable that Ukrainian technologies have been implemented.

On March 1, 2014, when public disorder became more serious in Ukraine, four Zubr-class assault vessels that had been ordered by China from the earlier Yanukovich administration were pulled out by two tugboats from Feodosia Shipyard in Crimea and exported to China. These are the world’s largest hovercraft-type assault ships. Why were they so quickly exported to China when they had not been test sailed or completed? It is said that China feared that once Crimea was annexed by Russia, such weapon exports would be frozen.

China also imported massive quantities of weapons from Russia, but most sophisticated weapons were banned for export to China. Imports that were cheap and undeterred by Russian interference were vital to China. It is said that further Ukrainian technical cooperation is required for the *Liaoning* to be fully operational. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia and the political confusion in Ukraine are both headaches for China.

If Ukraine joins the European Union an EU export embargo, effective since the Tiananmen Square bloodshed in 1989, will ban weapons export to China. Japan should therefore keep in mind that the security environment in East Asia may turn in its favor. However, many experts do see China eventually benefitting from the

confrontation between Russia and the West. There remain many possibilities arising from this situation.

Conclusion

In annexing Crimea, Putin achieved exactly the results he had in mind. The Russian people now ardently support him, with polls showing his support rate surging to around 80%. But stock prices plummeted in Russia following the sanctions imposed by the US and Europe, and continuous capital outflows have cast dark clouds over the Russian economy. These economic disorders were believed to have prompted Putin to request a postponement of the referendum to be held on May 11 in the two states of Donetsk and Lugansk. If nationalism among ethnic Russians becomes too highly emotional, there is a risk of losing control.

If the Russian economy turns worse, Russia could lose its ability to continue the confrontation. So far, Putin’s calculations have proved favorable for Russia, but things could take a sudden turn and begin to unravel. In the West also, there are senior conservatives, such as former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who are more moderate in seeing Ukraine as “a bridge between the East and the West” (*Washington Post*, March 6, 2014) and who believe it should not join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and that the US and Europe need a calm and collected judgment on this issue.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser under former President Jimmy Carter, offers the same kind of solution. He believes Ukraine should follow the Finland model. Finland signed a treaty with the Soviet Union in 1948 under which Helsinki agreed to remain neutral and not join NATO. In exchange, Moscow allowed Finland to remain independent (*Financial Times*, Feb. 23, 2014). Both these strategists are preaching fundamental settlements under which Ukraine’s long-term status would be guaranteed. The West and Russia should reach such kind of agreement through quiet diplomacy.

Japan is in dispute with Russia over the Northern Territories. While aligning itself with the US and Europe to take strong measures against Russia, Japan should also be prepared for any moment when it can bargain with Russia on the territorial issue. In the event that any favorable deal is possible, Japan’s National Security Secretariat should be prepared to take flexible and sensible actions. **JS**

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