Ukrainian Crisis exposes EU recklessness

The Federation Council of the Russian Parliament unanimously approved on March 1 the use of the Russian armed forces in stabilizing the rapidly deteriorating political situation in Ukraine. The decision was made after Russian President Vladimir Putin received an urgent appeal by the chairman of Crimea’s Council of Ministers for assistance in “ensuring peace and tranquility” in the Ukrainian Black Sea peninsula.

Whether or not Putin decides to follow through with such measures, one thing is clear. Moscow’s decision to possibly deploy troops in Ukraine to resolve the crisis will have a deep and resounding effect on the European Union’s image considering its role in contributing to the crisis. Achieving such an overarching political outcome will likely have serious long-term implications not only for Ukraine’s future, but for other states in Russia’s periphery seeking to forge closer ties with the West, primarily Georgia and Moldova.

On the heels of the Sochi Winter Olympics, where post-Soviet sportsmanship was on full display, it would be naïve to think that Russia would just stand by idle while Ukraine descends into chaos, which has been punctuated by the torching of political party offices by newly empowered neo Nazi parties, the passing of laws banning the Russian language and other ant-Russian policies that seek to marginalize large segments of Ukrainian society. But despite Ukraine’s strategic importance to Russia, often described as its “soft underbelly”, Moscow is unlikely to act in a way that would damage its image and renewed international standing, one that is characterized as principled and consistent in adhering to international law.

Russia has scored a number of propaganda points over the past year at the expense of the United States, such as the Snowden affair over the US’ illegal mass surveillance program, and Russia’s diplomatic victory in defusing the Syrian chemical weapons crisis. An “invasion” of Ukraine would certainly reverse such diplomatic godsends and only feed the “blame everything on Putin” chorus. Regardless of the flak Russia will likely receive in the short term as result of any involvement in Ukraine, the crisis has already provided an opportunity for Moscow to demonstrate the EU as playing a reckless and irresponsible role in the crisis.

The crisis in Ukraine was sparked several months ago when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych spurned a much-touted trade and association agreement with the EU at a key EU integration summit last November. In an attempt to resolve the escalating unrest, on February 21 Yanukovych reached an agreement with opposition leaders during negotiations brokered by the German, Polish and French foreign ministers, along with Russia’s ombudsman. But instead of ending to the street protests, the Ukrainian Parliament fired Yanukovych without going through the required impeachment proceedings and trial, as stipulated under the constitution. Soon thereafter, the president was forced to flee the country amid death threats.

Since this coup, Russia has been able to capitalize on the apparent anarchy in Kiev by emphasizing the EU’s indifference to the failed outcome of the peace agreement, and its apparent haste in recognizing the new leadership as legitimate. In exploiting this blatant hypocrisy, and as Russian aligned regions in Ukraine rebelled against the new authorities, Russia facilitated a high-powered press conference on February 28 for the deposed Ukrainian president which generated undue media attention given its preparations - escorted by fighter aircraft, Yanukovych was flown to the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don.
At the conference, Yanukovych reiterated that still the legitimate president of Ukraine and that the EU mediators bear responsible for failing to honor the February 21 peace accord. The event provided a platform to undermine Kiev’s new leaders and their Western supporters, as it raised further questions in Ukraine and abroad as the new regime’s constitutional legitimacy, and why the EU turned a blind eye.

When the news broke that Russia would possibly take military action in Ukraine, the Western media had a field day, presenting it as an imminent invasion of the country. Such a portrayal, unsurprisingly, invoked memories of the 2008 war in Georgia in which Russia repelled Georgian military aggression against its breakaway region South Ossetia.

During and immediately following the five day war, Georgia was seen as having won the PR war, at least in the short term. Ultimately, however, this mattered little to Moscow as the immediate political outcome, and the long term political affects it would have, were far more important. The war demonstrated that Georgia could not rely on any Western military alliance and that a NATO security guarantee would not be backed up with action.

Despite all the rhetoric, NATO was unwilling to risk a third world war with Russia by intervening in the Georgian conflict, during which locals searched the sky for the American planes coming to their rescue. Such unfulfilled expectations also sent a strong message to other former Soviet republics, primarily in Eastern and Central Europe, that considered a military partnership with the US and NATO as a bulwark against a resurgent Russia. Moreover, NATO was seen as reckless, as it was the alliance’s statements prior to the war that encouraged the Georgian leadership to attempt to militarily regain its breakaway regions.

If the war in 2008 damaged NATO’s image and derailed realistic chances for Georgia’s membership in the military bloc, the outcome of the current crisis in Ukraine will likely be a significant weakening of the EU’s image, as well as its main integration instrument, the Eastern Partnership program. Even if Russia considers further action in Ukraine unnecessary, the EU will have proven itself to be not only an untrustworthy partner in mediating pressing political negotiations; it will be seen as having played a direct role in creating a much larger crisis, one which till now, has forced Russia to respond with possible military force. Regardless of how the Ukrainian crisis unfolds and the extent of Russia’s involvement in stabilizing the country, Western leaders may be wise to rethink their integration policies towards Ukraine and other former Soviet republics given their reckless nature and the serious risks that are now ever so clear.

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