



## Ukraine Won't Be Solved Any Time Soon

by Emil Avdaliani

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The conflict in East Ukraine has reached a frozen phase in which neither side is making many gains. Despite agreements, the conflict has not seen any meaningful breakthrough for more than three years. Geopolitical imperatives dictate that progress will be contingent upon either Russia or Ukraine (i.e., the West) conceding their interests. The Ukrainian problem is rooted in the geography of the country as well as in the consistent failure of Russia to leverage its involvement in Syria and other theaters for western concessions.

To a European, Ukraine lies on the ancient invasion route through which all major eastern onslaughts on Europe take place. From a Russian perspective, however, Ukraine is the land through which western invasions of Russia occur. Russians well remember the powerful armies of both King Charles XII of Sweden in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and Hitler in the 20<sup>th</sup> century marching eastward through Ukraine.

Ukraine is an effective invasion route because it is flat and contains no major geographic barriers. By keeping Ukraine within its fold, Russia can extend its influence into the heart of Europe. It is only through Ukraine that Moscow has direct land access to its peacekeeping forces in Moldova's breakaway territory, Transnistria.

Ukraine's large size also enables it to function as a buffer state for Russia against western encroachment. A Ukraine under western influence would create an insoluble problem for Moscow, as NATO and/or the EU could potentially border Russia's restive north Caucasus region.

Ukraine also encompasses the Black Sea's entire northern coast, including the Crimean Peninsula. From Moscow's perspective, a Ukraine within NATO

would strip Russia of its influence on the Black Sea. It was for that reason that Russia annexed Crimea. Its unique location allows military fleets to reach any point within the Black Sea quickly and easily.

A Ukraine under western influence would also render the Russians unable to freely control the Kerch Strait, an approximately 25-mile-long channel no wider than 9 miles. The strait is strategically valuable as it connects the critically important Black Sea to the Azov Sea off Russia's northern Caucasus border. It thus allows Russia to control water routes and energy resources coming in and out from the Azov Sea.

Moscow is concerned that in light of the ongoing standoff with the West over Ukraine, the pro-Western government in Kiev could allow the strait to be used by Western military fleets and even NATO. Control over access to the Sea of Azov is critical to Moscow as it has direct access to the Don River, which separates the Russian hinterland from the north Caucasus. Moreover, according to the Russian calculus, the strategically important Don River could be used by foreign troops to enter the Russian mainland. Indeed, history has proven this Russian fear to be well-founded. Moscow is still haunted by Western plans to detach the Caucasus from the Russian mainland during the Crimean War (1853-56) and by the German occupation of Ukraine in WWII.

The Ukraine problem will remain insoluble because of Putin's failure to bargain for it with relation to Russia's involvement in Syria. From its initial military engagement in 2015, the Kremlin has hoped that as it gained momentum on the Syrian battlefield, the West would become more amenable to its position on Ukraine, making a bargain possible.

Beyond Syria, Moscow has been gradually building its position in other conflict zones. There have been multiple reports of Russians militarily supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Moscow has been vocal about the ongoing nuclear standoff on the Korean Peninsula. Even in Libya, Russia has been careful to slowly build its negotiating position by holding regular meetings with high officials.

Looking at these Russian actions from above, the Kremlin's intentions appear clear: it wants to gain as much political leverage as possible in a wide variety of conflicts around the world to influence or weaken the West's negotiating position in Ukraine, which remains the most crucial theater for Russia. But it is unlikely that this strategy will work. So far, the West has successfully blocked Russian initiatives around Syria. Moreover, Western resolve is borne out by its recently ramped-up pressure on Russia. The US introduced new sanctions in August, while various reports indicate that the EU will likely extend its own measures against the Kremlin and Russian state companies in late 2017 or early 2018. In addition, Washington now openly talks about providing lethal arms to

Kiev and holds regular military exercises on the Russian periphery, from Moldova to the South Caucasus.

Taking the whole picture into consideration, it is more than likely that the Russian and Western imperatives around Ukraine will remain paramount in the near future. Geopolitical interests will continue to limit diplomatic breakthroughs in east Ukraine, while Russian attempts to leverage its involvement in Syria or other emerging conflicts for Ukraine will be blocked by Western powers.

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