

Reframing the Ukrainian Crisis

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In April 2021, according to the statements of [Josep Borrell](#), the High Representative of the European Union, at least 150,000 Russian soldiers were deployed on a military exercise at the Ukrainian border. Still shaken from being snubbed during his [visit to Moscow](#) in February – where he was told at a press conference that the EU was not a reliable partner – he no doubt exaggerated the situation to set off alarm bells in Europe. Russia has not made the scale of its deployment secret, and has stated that this is a response to the [threat posed by NATO](#). President Vladimir Putin said that “Russia is [acting] within its rights,” effectively serving as a warning to those considering crossing the ‘[red line](#)’ that he has drawn.

Everyone understands that this red line is in Ukraine, but the idea of having to heed the Kremlin's warnings is polarizing Western administrations. [Some argue](#) that Russia's behaviour is aggressive and vindictive and must be harshly punished by concerted action by the allies, otherwise Moscow will see this as a signal that it can continue its strategy of intimidation. [Others](#) point out the strategic power balances and seek, through dialogue, to clarify the rules of peaceful coexistence, without which they are concerned that nothing will prevent us from engaging in a spiral of insecurity into an apocalyptic confrontation.

These two constraints do not seem to allow any outcome which is suitable for everyone. Tightening economic sanctions – or worse, a possible resumption of fighting – would cost Europe much more than the US. Consequently, it is far from certain that the Biden administration will be able to rebuild consensus within the Alliance on the way forward. Getting there will require imagination to reframe the problem, even if it means reviewing the role that the US and its NATO allies play in it. Is such a conceptual reframing of the crisis possible?

The Dialectic of Contradictory Narratives

An examination of the representations of the situation in Ukraine that are conveyed in Moscow and Washington reveals two narratives that appear to be completely contradictory. From the US perspective, the conflict began when a Russian operation was carried out against the regional administration of Crimea, in Simferopol, forcing local elected officials to endorse the holding of an unconstitutional referendum on autonomy, then another on the annexation of the peninsula to Russia. Carried out according to the Russian doctrine of [Maskirovka](#) (‘[deception](#)’), the operation resulted in the capture of Ukrainian bases and the illegal annexation of the peninsula. The expansive Russian efforts continue in Donbass through active, but unacknowledged, support for the rebels of the self-proclaimed Lugansk and Donetsk republics.

From the Russian perspective, this narrative is rejected and we hear a parallel story, one that is seen as perfectly valid. According to the Russian narrative, at the turn of 2014 a mass mobilization was organized in Ukraine with the [collusion of Washington](#). The aim was to bring down the democratically elected government of Ukraine that had come to power in 2010 on a platform of rejoining Russia. Far-right irregular militias took part in the riots which forced President Yanukovich to flee the capital of Kyiv. They contributed to the formation of an unconstitutional power which swears that it will force Moscow to give up all influence in their country. The new regime even wants to evict the Russian navy from its historic naval base in Sevastopol, promising to tear up the existing lease. Worse still, the Russian-speaking population which opposes this unelected government has fallen victim to so-called “anti-terrorist operations”, again with the [support of the United States](#) and some of its allies.

It is not the constitutive facts of these narratives which are contradictory, but rather the identification and the indictment of who is the cause of this war. Each side’s narrative is based on a biased selection or emphasis of certain facts, which stems from their desire to place the responsibility for the crisis on each other, increasing the intensity of the conflict.

The antagonism is based on the normative foundations of their respective actions. On the one hand, we find the messianic idea that the West must come to the aid of the democratic forces of an independent state which has repeatedly been promised the [guarantee of its territorial integrity](#). This European country must not be abandoned in favor of the neo-imperialist inclinations of a Russia that is increasingly authoritarian and which violates human rights. This position justifies the delivery of lethal weapons to Ukraine, which began under the Trump administration.

On the other hand, there is the anachronistic idea that the great powers have an exclusive right of interference in their immediate periphery. Since Washington opened hostilities by interfering in Russia’s backyard, [proponents of realpolitik](#) understand that a retaliation was inevitable. Never could the strategic port of Sevastopol have been occupied by US ships without Russia fighting back. And of course, any attempt to reconquer Donbass (where half a million people who have already applied for and obtained Russian citizenship now live) would be opposed by means of arms.

With 13,000 people now dead, demonstrations of force continue on both sides. All of the constituent elements of the conflict remain in place. Or almost.

The Minsk Protocol

Largely forgotten by these two rival narratives, the Minsk Protocol, which was signed in February 2015, remains to this day the only basis for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and the parties to the agreement are involved on both the domestic and international levels. Does anyone still remember that the agreements in this treaty, sponsored by the “Normandy Quartet” (France-Germany-Russia-Ukraine) and signed between the leaders of the secessionist republics and the Ukrainian government, were formally approved in United Nations Security Council [Resolution 2202](#)?

Predominantly negotiated by two actors who are, in a military context, heavyweights of European diplomacy, the agreement was very unfavorable to the Ukrainian army – who have directly confronted units of Russian “volunteers” on Ukrainian territory – and is [hardly acceptable](#) for supporters of a Ukraine that is totally free from the influence of the Kremlin. The terms of the agreement are relatively favorable to Russia, which retains, through its security control over the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, a solid [hold](#) on Ukraine's transatlantic future.

Indeed, the agreement calls for holding local elections supervised by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), followed by the reintegration of these regions into the Ukrainian state, but only after constitutional changes have given them very broad autonomy. This is a prerequisite for the return of Ukrainian forces along the border with Russia. Moreover, the agreement refers to respect for the country's territorial integrity without even mentioning the thorny issue of Crimea, which is not addressed in the document at all.

More than six years have passed since the violent offensive on the crossroad town of Debaltseve, in which Russian-backed rebels inflicted a crushing defeat on Ukrainian forces. As a reminder, it was not the risk of NATO's military response that prevented Russia from then making further progress. Already committed in other regions, NATO is clearly not in a position to compete directly with Russia in helping an aspiring member, as the Georgians painfully learned at their own expense in the war of August 2008. The economic cost of sanctions alone is a deterrent for Moscow. However, given the size of its exportable resources and access to the [Chinese market](#), these sanctions remain - as we have seen - only partially effective in dissuading Russian action.

Like most ceasefires, the Minsk Protocol is the result of a fragile balance of power in which the restraint of the victor was obtained through the concessions of the vanquished. Following this, Washington then stepped aside from the negotiating process. Under pressure from the Franco-German partnership, Kyiv agreed to recognize a dividing line within the country, guaranteeing amnesty to all secessionist fighters. Of course, it is not easy for the government to implement the constitutional changes necessary for the formal reintegration of largely autonomous regions, leaving the constitutional changes unpopular. However, Russian troops training at the border indicate that renegeing on this agreement could result in a dramatic intensification of hostilities.

Canada's Position

The signing of the Minsk agreements following the military defeat in Donbass was generally disliked by the Ukrainian-Canadian population, particularly those from Galicia who still harbour resentment against the Soviet Empire for occupying Ukraine in 1939. Aware of the electoral weight of this Canadian minority, especially in the Prairies (where it constitutes more than 10% of the population), the Canadian government has always expressed loud and clear support for the legitimate aspirations for a sovereign and autonomous Ukraine. The most tangible proof of this commitment is expressed by Canada's contribution to the Multinational Joint Committee on Military Cooperation and Defence Reform with Ukraine, led by the United States, as well as five other participating allies (The United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, Poland and Lithuania). Operation UNIFIER, set up by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in 2015, constitutes non-lethal assistance to strengthen the Armed Forces of Ukraine, primarily through training.

While the Canadian government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper was openly in favour of Ukraine's inclusion in NATO, and made extremely [harsh remarks](#) against the Russian government, Harper's successor Justin Trudeau must now be more reserved on this issue because of how deeply the NATO Alliance is divided on it. The Alliance's expansion has proven to be destabilizing for the security environment, encouraging Moscow to double-down to avoid losing its foothold in Ukraine. On its own, the [strengthening](#) of Russia's nuclear arsenal (and the affiliated process of dismantling the Non-Proliferation regime that occurred under Donald Trump's presidency) is, like it or not, a cause for concern.

Recent [appeals](#) by President Zelenski to seek Canadian support for the Ukraine's admission into NATO did not elicit any comment from the Prime Minister, neither favorable nor unfavorable, which speaks to the discomfort that this dilemma causes in Canadian policy-making. It is understandable that it is difficult for Canada to dissociate itself from the geopolitical objectives of its main trading partner, the United States, and the hopes of its Ukrainian-Canadian population. At the same time, it must be remembered that Canada shares a long Arctic border with its Russian neighbor, a border it is not really able to protect. Can the government really risk opposing the pursuit of mutually acceptable terms for peaceful coexistence? If it cannot, Canada will have to clearly reiterate its support for the Minsk agreements.

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Redefining the Nature of the Problem

A few days before a first [summit](#) meeting on June 16th between Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, there are some positive signals coming from Washington that suggest the United States is looking for a less divisive strategy within NATO, probably to better cope with the rising threat of China. Two absolutely remarkable policy shifts have recently occurred without fanfare: 1) the threat of economic sanctions against European companies engaged in the construction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline connecting Russia and Germany has been [lifted](#), and 2) the NATO Brussels Summit in mid-June has left talks of the Ukraine's membership plan off the agenda. Ukraine was ultimately [not invited](#).

Should this be seen as the confirmation of a [defeat](#) in a geopolitical struggle between the West and Russia? Far from it, since the crisis nonetheless resulted in the inclusion of Ukraine in pan-European free trade. In addition, the annexation of Crimea and support for the rebels has whipped up anti-Russian nationalism in Ukraine, which is no longer the minority phenomenon it had been before 2014. While not completely defeated, Russia's soft power influence in the Ukraine is considerably weakened.

Moreover, the crisis can be described in a way that broadens its temporal framework beyond 2014. It is possible to examine the situation through the lens of what Ukraine has never ceased to be since independence in 1991: a battleground between different ethno-national representations, of which the Slavo-Orthodox component linked to Russia cannot to be subdued and destroyed, any more than Russophobic ethno-nationalism could have been extinguished by 50 years of Soviet domination. This conflict could thus once again be understood for what it was before degenerating into a [civil war](#) and a geopolitical battlefield, that is, as a deep crisis of subnational identity. Rather than being divided over how to punish Russia, Canada and its allies could consider ways to support this reconciliation among the Ukrainians themselves.