

The Crisis in Ukraine and Emerging Geo-Political Issues

Mr **Joseph Cirincione** is President of Ploughshares Fund, Washington, D.C., which also serves as an International Security Advisor Board for Secretary of State John Kerry. He spoke of the crisis in Ukraine and the emerging geo-political issues at an ISIS International Affairs Forum on 7 October 2014. The Forum was moderated by **Tan Sri Dato' Seri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan**, Chairman, ISIS Malaysia. This report was prepared by ISIS Research Assistant, **Ms Nurul Izzati Kamrulbahri**, and Intern, **Mr Abu Bakar Badruddin**.

The current political situation is very challenging and becoming more volatile each day. The ongoing crisis in Eastern Europe, particularly in Ukraine, and the rise of the self-proclaimed caliphate of the Islamic State (IS) have increased the concerns of many. According to **Mr Joseph Cirincione**, both conflicts have affected US foreign policy and regional stability.

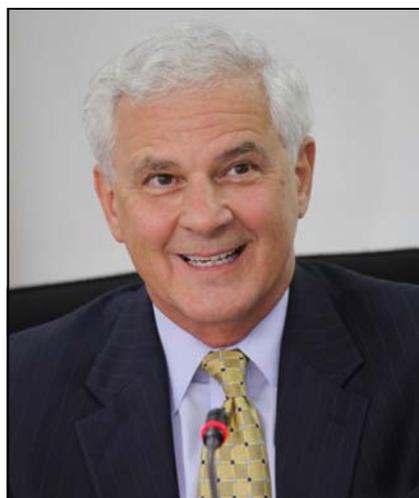
Demonstrations in Kiev began in November 2013, after former President Yanukovich's cabinet abandoned an agreement on closer economic ties with the European Union (EU). These street protests escalated into clashes at the Independence Square, making it the worst day of violence for almost 70 years. All of these culminated in the annexation of Crimea by Russia. Cirincione said that this crisis was an internal issue for Ukraine and, essentially, a Ukraine-Russia conflict. Nonetheless, the Crimean crisis has caused severe implications to the EU's global strategic security.

Why?

Firstly, Russia is an important country and also a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) — the so-called “P5” — which enables Russia to prevent the adoption of any “substantive” draft Council resolution. Note that it is also one of the world's largest nuclear armed states besides the United States. Secondly, Russia is involved in numerous issues around its border in Europe and Asia. Thirdly, Russia is a growing economic power house; its involvement, or non involvement, in global environmental issues affect many countries.

Spark of the crisis

According to Cirincione, the Ukraine crisis started when the Ukrainian Government moved towards a closer economic partnership with the EU. For Russia, the possibility of Ukraine joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was a matter



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of national security. Cirincione added that Russian leaders believed that US military-diplomatic actions were all targeted at Russia; they felt that the “democracy movement” in Eastern Europe was instigated by the United States as part of a plot by Washington to surround Russia.

The annexation of Crimea was the first incident, since the end of World War Two, in which territory was obtained through the use of force. In this case, however, both the United States and Russia have avoided direct military confrontation to contain the escalation of the crisis. Cirincione explained that it is not just about avoiding a war, it is also about re-engaging Russia as an important nation. It is vital that Russia cooperates with its European partners and the United States since Russia has been a productive partner on the global security stage. Russia's cooperation is necessary in maintaining international order and stability.

US-NATO allies

Efforts by President Obama to form a diplomatic-economic coalition in response to the Ukraine crisis have been effective although there was hesitancy in the early stages. Cirincione presumed that the United States and NATO were likely to

pursue three interrelated policies throughout the year. First, the United States and NATO do not want to take any actions that legitimise the annexation of Crimea and other territories in Eastern Europe. Second, they will continue to seek Moscow's cooperation on significant matters, such as negotiations on strategic nuclear arms control. Third, the United States will reassure its allies in Europe to keep the alliance strong.

To prevent exploitation in times of crisis, the EU will need to find ways and take concrete steps to decrease its dependency on Russia's natural gas.

"Unprecedented sanctions"

The United States and its allies have made "unprecedented sanctions" against Moscow — travel and trade have decreased, foreign reserves have been crippled, senior officials and businessmen have been blacklisted. However, the EU's energy security challenges are making it difficult for European sanctions to be imposed on Russia. Approximately 30 percent of Russia's natural gas is supplied to Europe and 50 percent of it is through Ukraine's gas pipeline. To prevent exploitation in times of crisis, the EU will need to

find ways and take concrete steps to decrease its dependency on Russia's natural gas.

Discussion

At the question and answer session, several issues were raised. A recent article in *Foreign Affairs* stated the United States' presence with NATO at the Russian border near Ukraine posed a threat to Russia. This caused Russia to be more vigorous as a means to deter. Cirincione disagreed with the writer's view. Instead, he stated that after the Cold War, the United States' foreign policies and military actions focused more on the Middle East and Asian region. Russia was no longer prioritised as a main threat to the United States' security. Hence any Russian feelings of being threatened by the United States are mainly paranoid views.

In playing its role as a superpower, what were the United States' priorities and concerns with reference to "bringing to justice" the perpetrators responsible for the downing of flight MH17 in Ukraine in July this year? Cirincione replied that the United States' major concern was to ensure that the process of bringing all the victims' bodies back to their respective homes was as fast as possible. The act of "bringing to justice" those responsible of this atrocious act should be left to the international bodies concerned. Though the United States may assist or contribute in terms of legal process, bodies



Participant posing a question

such as the International Court of Justice and the United Nations are better in handling this issue.

When asked on the possibility of Crimea returning to Ukraine and the United States role if this happens, Cirincione adopted a realistic approach. Crimea will not return to Ukraine after considering the Crimean sense of belonging to Russia. Dating back to 1954, Crimea was given to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev as a gesture under the Soviet Union. Strategically, Crimea is of no interest to the United States, Malaysia or any Asia Pacific states. Nonetheless, the annexation of Crimea by Russia is still not recognised by many countries. Regardless of the historical event of Russia-Crimea-Ukraine during the time of the Soviet Union, the process of gaining a territory should be peaceful and the initiatives should be taken by the Crimeans themselves and not by force. The annexation defeats the purpose of all the international laws established after World War II. He added that self-determination is vital and should not be undermined by anyone. He stated that there should be an establishment of an internationally verified and well-monitored referendum of self-determination.

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He said that the Russia-Ukraine conflict has created some economic insecurity among the EU countries. Though the instability in Ukraine will not have a direct impact on EU in general, the



A section of the participants

economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and its allies could affect some EU countries in the long run. Russia is important as it exports almost 30 percent of oil and gas to other EU countries through Ukraine. Any sanctions could trigger retaliations, resulting in a complicated web of negative impacts on the world economy.

In concluding, Cirincione identified two schools of thought in the United States on the issue of applying economic sanctions on Russia. The first school of thought is that all the conflicts occurring now are not due to external factors but mainly internal. This can be seen in the case of Putin's approval rating. His popularity rose to 80 percent this year as he gained more approval from the Russians. It was the exact opposite last year when Russians demonstrated against Putin and his administration in Moscow. Hence according to this school of thought, the sanction imposed is the main key in bringing down Putin's agenda. Putin's statement on the collapse of Soviet Union during the Cold War as the greatest tragedy of the 20th century has also brought out another school of thought. It believes that Putin's aggressive actions have to be stopped and economic sanction is the only effective way to do it.