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The Ukraine Standoff Won't End Anytime Soon

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Despite reports that cease-fire talks may soon resume between the Ukrainian government and separatists, there is little hope that the standoff between Russia and the West over Ukraine will be resolved in the foreseeable future.

While the world's focus has shifted to the violent military conflict between the rebels and government forces in eastern Ukraine, the broader confrontation between Russia and the West can only end where it began: Crimea. This reality ensures that the return of "normal" East-West relations will inconceivable for the next several years and beyond.

For reasons that should be obvious, the normalization of relations between Russia and the West will require the lifting of all sanctions that have been levied against Russia by the United States and the European Union since the conflict over Ukraine began.

At a Dec. 2 speech at NATO headquarters, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry indicated that key conditions for relaxing sanctions include Russia's termination of support for the armed

separatists in Ukraine, the withdrawal of all Russian troops and weapons from Ukraine, and respect for Ukraine's sovereignty and territory. The first two conditions are unlikely; the last is unimaginable.

Time and again, Russia has demonstrated a willingness to stoke the fires of conflict in eastern Ukraine when it sees an advantage in doing so, sending troops, weapons, and resources to the separatists at key moments when the movement appears to be in danger of failing. At other times, Russia has been willing to pull back its forces and support when there appears to be a tactical necessity to do so.

As recently as mid-November, reports indicated a new surge of Russian troops and military equipment entering Ukraine despite Russia's stated commitment to the cease-fire negotiated in Minsk in September.

This pattern of periodic tactical intervention and retreat prevents the solidification of a stable status quo on the ground while undermining the stability and survival of the Ukrainian government. There is little question that Putin has no interest in respecting Ukraine's sovereignty in the long run.

But even if there were a complete withdrawal of Russian support for Ukrainian separatists, the standoff between Russia and the West would remain unaltered. From the moment Russia annexed Crimea, that little peninsula has taken on immense symbolic importance for all parties to the conflict: Russia, Ukraine, and the West.

The first sanctions imposed against Russia were in response to the military invasion of Crimea and the eventual annexation of the region shortly thereafter. When Secretary Kerry speaks of respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty as a prerequisite for repealing sanctions, it is hard to imagine that anything less than Crimea's return to Ukrainian control will be acceptable to Kiev, Brussels or Washington. To the West, Crimea has become the potent — and unacceptable — symbol of Russia's rejection of the post-World War II consensus on the inviolability of international borders and national sovereignty.

Yet it is equally impossible to imagine Putin ever voluntarily handing back Crimea to a country that he once famously declared to not even be a real country. In his annual state of the union address on Dec. 4, Putin declared that Crimea "has a great civilizational and sacred meaning." More ominously, Putin declared that Crimea would be united with Russia "now and forever." There is no reason to doubt his sincerity in that statement.

Because each side has attached such significant symbolic meaning to this parcel of land jutting into the Black Sea, neither will be willing to walk away from it. The Crimean dilemma is what bargaining theorists in political science refer to as an "indivisible issue" whose all-or-nothing status prevents any kind of negotiated settlement. Disputes over such indivisible items tend to be the most intractable and enduring conflicts in international relations, a reality that is beginning to sink in for clear-eyed observers of the conflict.

This gloomy assessment leaves us contemplating what the next several years will bring for relations between Russia and the West. Several possibilities emerge, though it is nearly impossible to assess probabilities given the ever-fluid state of realities on the ground. If a cease-fire is implemented that at least results in a stable status quo of a "frozen conflict"

in Eastern Ukraine, some have suggested that the West might eventually find a way to move past or overlook the Crimean dilemma.

Here the historical analogy might be the Soviet Union's annexation of the Baltic states in 1940, an action that the United States never formally recognized. Despite that enduring disagreement, the Soviet Union and the United States still managed to find areas for cooperation in arms control. However, it will be a long time — if ever — before the West will "forgive and forget" Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Instead, the most likely scenario involves a protracted deep freeze in relations between Russia and the West, lasting years or even decades. This tension will almost certainly endure as long as Putin occupies the Kremlin thanks to the deep mutual antipathy that has developed between him and many Western leaders.

Furthermore, the imperatives of U.S. domestic politics ensure that no candidate or politician will want to appear being "soft" on Putin, ensuring that American political leaders will continue to take a hard line against Russia in the years to come.

Even after Putin's inevitable exit from Russian politics, it is hard to imagine a Russian president returning Crimea to Ukraine, though some sort of compensatory bargain might be within the realm of possibilities with enough water under the bridge. Until then, any cooperation between the West and Russia — even on areas where interests overlap — will be circumscribed and strained by the shadow of enduring sanctions.

The corrosive effects of the deep freeze will not be limited to international relations either, as it could eventually have serious consequences for Russia's domestic stability as well. It is now clear that sanctions, combined with falling oil prices, rising inflation, and a plummeting ruble, are taking a visible toll on the Russian economy even if they have not yet achieved the desired change in Putin's policies.

The protracted standoff over Ukraine will continue to sap the Russian economy of life for years to come, increasingly undermining Russia's internal political stability and Putin's control over the regime he has built.

With no end in sight to the Ukrainian dispute, it thus becomes a waiting game for both sides to see who can hold on the longest. Only time — a long time — will tell, but there can be no doubt that the stakes are enormous as we settle into the bleak new "normal."

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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