The Changing Context

As recently as 1990, 2000 and even 2010, the international scene in Europe was generally very secure. NATO and the EU enjoyed unbelievable success in expanding to the East. Even with the Russian war with Georgia in 2008, most observers and policymakers in the West might readily have believed that, while Russia was not the easiest of partners, there appeared to be no chance of a return to the kind of tensions in Russian – Western relations that had existed from the mid-1940s right up to the mid-1980s. Indeed, after the notable but not fatal setback of the war over Georgia, the then-new Obama Administration sought in 2009 to undertake a ‘reset’ of relations with Russia, to put them back on the path of reasonable cooperation. All of that changed at the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014: indeed, looking back in ten years we might say that a new and serious rivalry came into being in only the three or four months that spanned and joined those two years.

Key Events

The return of serious rivalry between Russia and the United States and its European partners began, surprisingly, with negotiations over a seemingly routine trade agreement. In the summer of 2013, the European Union (EU) and Ukraine began the final stages of talks for an Association Agreement, whose content was strictly limited to enhancing economic ties between Ukraine and the EU countries. These talks had commenced in 2007, and for many years it appeared that Russia was largely indifferent to or at most only mildly concerned by the prospect of an accord aimed at promoting economic integration between Ukraine and its western neighbors.

However, once the proposed agreement was published in the summer of 2013, Russia voiced increasing concerns, and in fact undertook low-level economic sanctions against Ukraine to dissuade it from going forward with the EU partnership. When, in November 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych announced that he had decided not to sign the EU agreement, violent protests erupted in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev, and especially in Maidan Square. Germany, France, and Poland sought to broker a compromise between Yanukovych and the protestors. This effort failed, and at the end of February, after continuing social protests, President Yanukovych fled Ukraine for Russia.

Russia then acted. What by most accounts were Russian commando units without official insignia entered the Crimean peninsula in the far south of Ukraine and occupied strategic locations throughout the peninsula (see Map 2.1). They, together with Russian forces operating from the important naval base that Russia had been leasing at the Crimean port of Sevastopol, gave support to local Russian-speaking separatists.
who organized an internationally disputed referendum in mid-March that called for a unification of Crimea with Russia. President Putin signed into law the annexation by Russia of Crimea on 18 March 2014. For the first time since World War II, a European state, Russia, had used force to seize territory from a neighbor, and had done so even though in 1994 and 1997 Russia had signed agreements that recognized the inviolability of Ukraine's borders.

The crisis escalated during the remainder of 2014. In the spring and summer Russia-backed separatist forces fought regular Ukrainian units and established independent entities in the far east of Ukraine, that is, in the economically important regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (see Map 2.1). That fighting included in July 2014 the employment of a Russian-origin missile to shoot down – by all accounts by separatist forces – a Malaysian civilian airliner with 298 passengers killed. The new pro-Western Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, elected in May 2014, ordered in August a large-scale military operation to defeat separatist forces in Donetsk and Luhansk. When it appeared that the Ukrainian forces might achieve victory, they were turned back by regular Russian combat forces that had come to the aid of the separatists. Talks in Minsk, Belarus, led in September 2014 to a ceasefire between Ukraine on the one hand and the separatists and Russia on the other. This ceasefire broke down at the outset of 2015 and heavy fighting ensued. The rebels achieved a major victory:
they seized Debaltseve, as a result of which they attained control over a key railroad intersection there and secure lines of rail communications throughout the territory they now hold (see the yellow outlined rail lines in Map 2.1). The rebels and the government then agreed to a second ceasefire in February 2015.

By the summer of 2015, after the deaths of more than six thousand combatants and civilians, an uneasy peace seemed to take hold in Ukraine. However, news reports in July suggested that separatists and several thousand Russian troops might be preparing for a new offensive aimed at the south-east Ukrainian city of Mariupol (see Map 2.1). If that city were to come under separatist or Russian control, then Russia would be in a strong position to seize additional Ukrainian territory and to establish a direct land route from its homeland to its newly acquired Crimean territory.

In addition, during 2014, Russia appeared to be succeeding in persuading or inducing several neighbors to accede to a new Russia-crafted and dominated economic arrangement, the Eurasian Union. This new arrangement will induce or even oblige members to look to Moscow for economic leadership and not seek closer economic or especially political ties with the EU. Belarus and Kazakhstan joined the Eurasian Union in the summer of 2014, and Armenia and Kyrgyzstan did so at the end of that year.

Russia, in sum, by early 2015 had annexed Crimea, had taken control through its separatist proxies of a large portion of eastern Ukraine, threatened additional territories in southeastern Ukraine, and through the Eurasian Union was creating a new economic and political sphere of influence over several former Soviet republics.

The United States and its European allies responded on numerous fronts to the Russian military annexation of Crimea and its support for the separatists in eastern Ukraine. First, the United States and NATO, and other European countries acting through the European Union, imposed moderately severe economic sanctions on Russia. Second, beginning in the spring of 2014, the United States and its NATO partners began enhanced air patrols over the Baltic allies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and at the same time the United States dispatched a contingent of about 600 ground forces to Poland and the Baltics. United States Special Forces units also were deployed to western Ukraine to train Ukrainian military forces, and the United States and other NATO countries provided a variety of non-lethal military equipment to Ukraine, such as radios, ambulances, and foodstuffs. (There are ongoing debates within the NATO Alliance about taking the more dramatic step of providing lethal military aid to Ukraine.) Finally, the EU pressed ahead on the economic side: it and Ukraine signed their Association Agreement in June 2014 and began the long process of implementing its terms.

**Revisiting the Textbook**

This new rivalry between Russia and the West underscores several themes that are pursued in *Introduction to International Relations*. First, and most generally, as we highlighted in Chapter 2 on the history of international relations, and in Chapter 5 on the causes of war, international relations is a domain of human interaction in which war is a rare but persistent and deadly possibility. We see in the case of Ukraine and a new East-West division something we also discussed in Chapter 5, namely, many inter-state military conflicts have their roots in specific conflicts of interests that may
center on policy disputes (the Russian fear of a Ukrainian-EU Association Agreement), security fears (the Russian concern that Ukrainian partnership with the EU might ultimately jeopardize Russia's vitally important naval base at Sevastopol and might even end with Ukraine's joining NATO), and ethnic identity (the gap between those in Ukraine who by culture and language identify with Russia as opposed to those who identify themselves in opposition to Russia). Finally, we see in the war in Ukraine an instance of a tendency we identified at the end of Chapter 5, namely, domestic violence and civil wars can become internationalized with intervention and counter-intervention by outside powers.

Second, the different schools of theoretical thinking about international relations that we discussed in Chapter 2 may help us understand how the new Russia-NATO/EU conflict has come into being. Constructivist theory, for example, would highlight the possibility that the conflict indicates that Russian President Vladimir Putin and his main supporters have rejected the kind of liberal-democratic international order that the United States and its allies believed could and should be created in the wake of the end of the Cold War. Realist theory would add that the reason why Russia can now push back against the United States is that Russian leaders have come to see that the United States has limits on its power (highlighted by the failure of the United States to impose its will in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as its need to pivot toward Asia in the face of growing Chinese assertiveness), and that within those limits Russia can re-assert itself and seek a renewed sphere of influence at least in Ukraine if not further west. Feminist theory would emphasize that, with only one notable exception, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, all of the national leaders who have failed to contain and manage the Ukraine crisis are men.

Finally, we can make productive use of the levels-of-analysis approach that we have deployed throughout *Introduction to International Relations*, but particularly in Chapters 4 and 5. For example, it is quite possible that President Putin's deep disdain for the West might be one reason he is determined to re-assert Russian interests and power. Similarly, as described in a report by the UK House of Lords, individual EU policy makers failed to understand the depth of Russian hostility toward an EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and struggled to see the implications of this agreement from the perspective of Russian interests. Turning to the domestic-institutional level of analysis, the absence of democracy in Russia may account in part for why Russian leaders have felt unconstrained in using force in Ukraine even at the cost of curtailed economic ties with the West. At the same time, Russia's intervention into Ukraine has produced stunning levels of at least temporary popular support for Putin, raising the possibility that in pursuing that conflict we are witnessing a diversionary-war domestic political strategy on his part. Finally, turning to the inter-state level of analysis, the condition of anarchy in which Russia, Ukraine, and the Western countries have been operating, with all of the attendant risks of misperception and miscalculation, likely contributed to the failure of diplomacy to head off the crisis.
Further Reading

