

How More Likely the Ukraine Crisis Can Be Settled?

Abstract

Since the eruption of the Ukraine crisis, various parties have subsequently proposed ideas for a political settlement of this issue. Nevertheless, due to a complex range of interests involved in it and also a lack of trust among the parties having a relevance to the Ukraine issue, so far no big breakthrough has been made toward resolving the crisis. Recently, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with Ukraine's counteroffensive taking place, has faced a new round of escalation. Against this context, this article tends to assess how more likely the Ukraine crisis can be settled. It maintains that the U.S. position on the Ukraine issue would matter very significantly in determining how long the crisis could last. Besides that, other series of factors such as the outcome of Ukraine's counteroffensive would likely affect the positions of relevant parties toward handling the Ukraine issue as well. This article assumes that the Ukraine crisis most likely will be ended with a stand-off between the conflicting parties. Therefore, ending the war at an earlier date and adopting a different approach in managing the Ukraine issue would serve the interest of all parties.

Key words: Russia-Ukraine War, Counteroffensive, U.S. Position on the Ukraine Crisis, Korean-model, Israeli-Style

Introduction

Since the eruption of the Ukraine crisis, which has lasted for about 17 months already, various parties have subsequently proposed ideas or plans for a political settlement of this issue. At the very early stage of the Ukraine crisis last year, the Turkish side had ever played a very significant mediating role in bringing Russia and Ukraine together to negotiate; and by then the two conflicting parties had managed to make certain progress toward resolving the Ukraine crisis. Yet, due to a series of complex interests involved, the positive momentum achieved was shortly being reversed.¹ Then, in February 2023, China released a position document on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis.² Following that, China sent a special envoy to Europe to exchange views with the officials from Russia, Ukraine, and the European Union in order to secure an early ceasefire of the Ukraine crisis. Besides that, Brazilian President advised the establishment of a special G20-like group to focus on dealing with the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Furthermore, at the Shangri-la Dialogue held in Singapore on 2-4 June 2023, Indonesian Defense Minister suggested to have the involvement of the UN peacekeeping

forces in helping stop the fighting on the battle ground by separating the Russian and Ukrainian forces and setting up a demilitarized zone, in addition to holding new referendums under the sponsorship of the UN in the territories which had voted to re-join Russia.³ Moreover, a group of 7 African leaders respectively from South Africa, Zambia, Comoros, Congo Brazzaville, Egypt, Senegal, and Uganda made a trip to Europe to discuss their joint peace strategy with the conflicting parties on 16-17 June.⁴

In response, Russia and Ukraine had welcomed the initiatives proposed by relevant parties. Nevertheless, due to a range of complex factors involved in the Ukraine crisis, so far no clear breakthrough toward achieving a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine has been made.

Against the above context, this piece aims to assess what will be the likely development of the Ukraine crisis in the coming steps, and to a larger extent, how more likely the Ukraine crisis can be settled eventually. It will begin by briefly outlining the development of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in recent months on the frontline as well as on the non-battlefield. Then, it will value the positions generally held by the concerned parties on the ongoing Ukraine crisis, as well as the impacts of various positions on the development trend of the Ukraine crisis. Finally, this analysis will tend to foresee most likely in what ways the Ukraine crisis can be settled.

Development of the Ukraine Crisis on both the Frontline and Non-battlefield in Recent Months

In recent months, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has been facing a new round of escalation, as both sides have upgraded the measures against each other. In early May just about a week before the celebration of Russia's Victory Day against Nazi Germany, two unmanned drones attacked the Kremlin. One of them was exploded above the roof of a building where Russian President's residence is based. No losses and injuries occurred due to the special preventive measures taken by the Russia side. Kremlin took this incident as an attempted attack targeting Russian President by Ukraine, and claimed that Russia would reserve the right to retaliate in anytime, anywhere, and any manner.⁵ In the meantime, the Ukrainian side denied any involvement in the Kremlin attack.

Besides that, in the same month, the Russian side repelled an attempted sabotage to two Russian nuclear power plants. Two Ukrainian men were captured; and another one escaped and was by then on the wanted list of Russia's security service department.⁶

Furthermore, on 22 May, a small group of forces secretly intruded into Russia's Belgorod region which borders Ukraine, killed 1 Russian civilian, and wounded 12 others.⁷ More than 70 attackers were also killed during the fighting.⁸

Moreover, in early June, the Kakhovka dam based in the Kherson region was destroyed. The dam disaster had forced a great number of people to be evacuated from the flooded region. Russia and Ukraine accused each other of carrying out the sabotage. The Russian side was also critical of the West for failing to prevent Ukraine from destroying the Kakhovka dam. It further claimed that in December 2022 Ukraine already attacked the Kakhovka dam, as documented by the U.S. media.⁹

In the following month, the Ukrainian side had carried out another series of sabotage operations including raiding the Crimea bridge for the second time as well as using unmanned drones to attack Crimea etc.

After all, the above listed attacks are just part of a whole series of sabotage operations having happened on the Russian soil and Russia-controlled regions since the beginning of Russia's special military operation. In response to the sabotage activities, Russia has intensified the level of its strikes against the key facilities of Ukraine.

It is assumed that, before reaching a ceasefire deal between the conflicting parties, apart from the frontline fighting between the military service men of the two countries, both Russia and Ukraine will also need to deal with a bad situation on the non-frontline from occasion to occasion.

Besides the evolving situation on the non-battlefield, with regard to the combat on the frontline, for many months before late May, the fighters of the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company, had played the most significant part in fighting the Ukrainian troops on the frontline. Following months of heavy fighting, on 20 May, the Head of the Wagner Group claimed the full capture of the Bakhmut city. According to the media report, the fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces for taking control of Bakhmut can be the hardest one since WWII. Both sides had suffered great casualties - the Chief of the Wagner Group revealed that around 20000 Russian service men lost their lives while the Ukrainian side lost approximately 50000.¹⁰ Though the Bakhmut battle was not the end of the Russia-Ukraine war, still it mattered very significantly to both sides.

Following the heavy fighting between Russian and Ukrainian troops in Bakhmut, since the beginning of June, Ukraine has launched the country's long-awaited counteroffensive from a few directions. From the information released by the media outlets, till late July, both Russia and Ukraine had borne further losses; and the Ukrainian side appeared to have suffered more. Also, Ukraine's counteroffensive has so far shown a slow pace.¹¹

Positions Held by the Concerned Parties toward Ukraine's Counteroffensive and the Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis in General

Along with the development of the Russia-Ukraine war on both the frontline and non-battle ground, it has also appeared to be a growing pressure from many western officials on Ukraine. Even though they have expressed their continuing support to Ukraine in various forms, in the meantime, some have also been concerned about the outcomes of western support. Some have held high expectations to Ukraine's counteroffensive. Then Ukrainian Ambassador to Britain ever said that "the West has piled 'too much pressure' on Kiev and has built up 'too much expectation' about the counteroffensive."¹² Therefore, in the future, how long the western aid to Ukraine can be sustained, and what amount of support Ukraine can continue to receive under all circumstances will also be crucial issues to be taken into account by relevant parties.

On Ukraine's counteroffensive, before it really took place, a range of signals had been uncovered by various parties. The the U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland in a Security Forum organized by the Open Ukraine Foundation in May 2023 revealed that by May 2023 the U.S. had been together with Ukraine preparing the counteroffensive for about 4 to 5 months already; and the counteroffensive would be "likely starting and moving concurrently" with events such as the NATO summit (which was already held in Lithuania on 11 July).¹³ Mrs. Nuland by then also indicated that the U.S. has already started to discuss with the Ukrainian side on a long-term plan to help Ukraine's future.¹⁴

From the Ukrainian side, regarding the timing of the counteroffensive, in May, a series of messages had subsequently been sent out by the Ukrainian officials - one of the messages was that the counteroffensive had already been underway by then; another one was that the counteroffensive hadn't started yet, as Ukraine didn't receive enough weapons and munitions from its western supporters; and the third one was that the counteroffensive would come soon.¹⁵

Later on, Russian President on 9 June claimed that Ukraine's counteroffensive had already begun as evidenced by the deployment of Ukraine's strategic reserve.¹⁶ Then, on 10 June, Ukrainian President also confirmed that the long-awaited counteroffensive had been underway.¹⁷

It is not certain how long exactly this round of counter-operation could last. Some assumed that it may last till the end of August. The main concern for the Ukrainian side is to sustain the western support under all circumstances as long as it can.

Besides the great concerns of the West about the outcome of Ukraine's counteroffensive, in terms of the settlement of the Ukraine crisis, apparently the U.S. position on the Ukrainian issue matters most significantly in deciding how long the Ukraine crisis could last and how it can be settled. The media uncovered in May that the U.S. officials had been internally discussing the consideration of a Korean-model for the settlement of the Ukraine crisis.¹⁸ The Korean-model basically means to suspend the fighting between the direct conflicting parties by signing an armistice and establishing a demilitarized zone for avoiding further great casualties of both sides.

More recently, the U.S. officials had also discussed an Israeli-style security arrangement for Ukraine. In early July, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan revealed that before the U.S. and its western allies will agree to offer Ukraine a NATO membership, they would potentially provide Ukraine with an Israeli-style support in various forms including military and other kinds of assistance in a long run, with the purpose of making Ukraine have the capacity to "defend itself and deter future aggression."¹⁹

For the time being, both Russia and Ukraine insist to keep their own terms respectively regarding the settlement of the Ukraine crisis. In a recent interview with TASS news agency, Russian Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said that Russia would only take into consideration the option of "completing the special military operation".²⁰ He also indicated that it is unlikely to have real negotiations with the current Kiev regime, as the Ukrainian authority has banned any negotiation with the Russian government.²¹ While on the Ukrainian side, the Ukrainian authority demanded Russia to withdraw its troops from all the territories claimed by Ukraine before conducting any negotiation with Russia.

Under the present condition, it is hard to predict how long the war between Russia and Ukraine will last. Yet, in the meantime, there is also a need to be aware that certain crucial factors could significantly affect the trend of the Ukraine crisis in the next steps. One of the key factors would have a relevance to the outcome of Ukraine's counteroffensive. Given the great amount of efforts devoted by the West to Ukraine in both material and non-material terms, the counteroffensive would, from a certain degree, affect the positions and attitudes of western countries toward dealing with the Ukraine crisis. If the counteroffensive fails to achieve the result as Ukraine's western supporters have long expected, some would likely raise their pressure on Ukraine to negotiate. The United States, in that case, may further push Ukraine to accept certain terms set by the U.S. in order to secure its overall strategic interest.

In addition, the result of the 2024 U.S. election will possibly have a big impact on the trend of

the Russia-Ukraine war as well. If the current U.S. President gets re-elected, there will be a higher likelihood for the U.S. to maintain its current policies and measures toward the Ukraine crisis for a longer while. Yet, we shouldn't completely rule out the possibility that the Biden government may adjust the U.S. current approach even before the 2024 election or after the election (if the U.S. President wins a second term).

Then, when would the U.S. possibly adjust its policies and measures toward Ukraine? To a larger extent, in what ways more likely would the Ukraine crisis get settled eventually?

How More Likely the Ukraine Crisis Can Be Settled?

The timing of the U.S. policy change toward managing the Ukraine crisis will very much depend on the evolving situation on the frontline as well as on the non-battlefield. Nonetheless, from the author's understanding, regardless of how long the current policies of the U.S. government will last, they will not likely change the final result of the Ukraine crisis, which most likely will be ended with a stand-off between the warring parties. Therefore, the earlier the U.S. alters its policies and measures, the less suffering all sides have to bear.

The most important reason behind the final ends of a stand-off is rooted in the fact that, since the breach of the Minsk agreements, there has been no trust anymore between Russia and Ukraine. To restore trust, both Russia and Ukraine need to make concessions. Yet, they are not ready and most likely will not be ready to do so. At the moment, the Ukrainian side doesn't believe that Russia will not launch another round of special military operation in the future, even if under the condition that the concerned parties manage to reach an agreement. While for the Russian side, for a long time already even before the Ukraine crisis, the Russians had felt being deceived by certain western countries. In recent years, a number of factors including the plot behind the signing of the Minsk accords and then the failure of fulfilling the Minsk agreements by the Ukrainian government have made Russia once again lose its trust in Ukraine and its western counterparts. By the way, on 6 June, in an interview with the Italian media *Corriere della Sera*, the former Ukrainian President Pyotr Poroshenko once again confirmed that the signing of the two Minsk agreements had bought time for him to arm Ukraine.²²

Therefore, under the current situation, the goal of building trust between Russia and Ukraine and between Russia and some western countries would be hard to achieve. It is assumed that, at the early stage of the second Ukraine crisis, there could be a possibility, under the mediation of third parties, for Ukraine and Russia to re-build trust by respectively compromising their positions, and to eventually settle the Ukraine crisis. However, given that the ongoing crisis has been escalated to a very deep level, now it appears to be no space anymore for bilateral negotiations between Russia and Ukraine to resolve the crisis. It is hopeful of a miracle regarding this matter to take place in the future.

While in the meantime, for the interests of all concerned parties, even if trust cannot be easily restored, there should still be a need to jointly find a workable arrangement for resolving the Ukraine crisis. The big western powers, especially the United States, need to be aware that they shouldn't allow the severe situation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict to develop idly, as prolonging the conflict would risk dragging the relevant parties into an uncontrollable situation. Besides that, innocent

people deserve to have a safe and better life rather than die on the frontline and non-battlefield.

From the U.S. perspective, it is in need to realize that, adjusting the country's current policies toward the Ukraine issue at an early date would serve the U.S. long-term interest well. The U.S. main concern, as already mentioned, is to keep its influence in Ukraine and in Europe, and through its involvement in the affairs of Ukraine and beyond to balance Russia. To achieve this general strategic goal, on the one hand, the U.S. has managed to avoid engaging in a direct war with Russia for preventing a nuclear war. On the other hand, the U.S. government has expressed its interest in shifting away from the current approach in aiding Ukraine with high-intensity to a regular and long-term one, in line with which, to meet Ukraine's demands as well as to deal with the Russia factor.

At the moment, Russia and Ukraine commit to deploy military means to resolve the Ukraine crisis, and none of them would consider a Korean-model or a Israeli-style security arrangement. Along with the evolving situation on the frontline and non-battlefield, there should be a possibility for all the parties to take either the Korean-model or the Israeli-style as their option. In what approach the Ukraine crisis can be settled, for a very significant part, will depend on how the U.S. would tend to handle this matter.

In addition to the Korean-model or the Israeli-style security arrangement, regarding the final ends of the Ukraine crisis, another possibility could be that there will be no agreement or armistice reached among the concerned parties. Under this scenario, the Ukraine crisis would be turned into a long-term unresolved issue. Both Russia and Ukraine would dismiss each other's territorial claims, and may occasionally launch attacks against each other just like the scenario that had occurred between Ukraine and Russia-backed forces roughly between March 2014 and February 2022.

Conclusion: the Way forward

Apparently, the current circumstance is not desirable for all the parties having a relevance to the Ukraine crisis. In retrospect, prolonging the Russia-Ukraine conflict over the past around 17 months since the second Ukraine crisis began has so far only made the situation even worse. Therefore, instead of allowing the situation to keep escalating till an uncontrollable level, there is a need for the big powers, in particular the United States, to realize that ending the war at an early date and in the meantime adopting a different approach in managing the Ukraine issue will serve the interest of the U.S. and also of all other parties.

Notes

1. Under the mediation of the Turkish side, Russia and Ukraine had reached a general consensus on the permanent neutrality of Ukraine. The two sides had also negotiated the level of Ukraine's demilitarization. However, following the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Bucha area of Ukraine, which was taken by the Russian side as "a goodwill gesture" for further negotiations with Kiev, what had been agreed between the two countries was reversed by the Ukrainian authority. The reason behind this, as accused by the Ukrainian side,

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