

Why the War in Donbass Is Difficult to Reconcile: Based on the Comparison to the 2014 Crimean War

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Abstract: After the Crimean crisis in 2014, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict re-emerged in the form of war in the Donbass. The two conflicts were handled in completely different ways, with the Crimean crisis ending in a short period, while the war in the Donbass lasted for more than a year. Using a case study and comparative politics approach, this paper examines the reasons for the intractability of this war by comparing the two Russia-Ukraine conflicts. The paper begins by setting the context of the two conflicts, aiming to show how the differences like the war, government strategy, the level of Western support, and the ethnic composition of the conflict areas have had an impact on the intractability of the war. The paper suggests that the war will be a long-term stalemate and that the key point of mediation will be China's involvement. This article fills a gap in the scholarship by comparing the two Russia-Ukraine conflicts.

Keywords: Russian-Ukrainian conflicts, Crimean War, Donbass War, comparative case study

1. Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin mobilized Russian troops to invade Ukraine under the pretext of “demilitarization and de-Nazification”[1]. This action not only determined the fate of Ukraine but also had a direct impact on relations between countries in the international arena [2]. After Russia chose to invade Ukraine by way of war, the future of Ukraine will be tied to the world order. As North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) continues to expand eastward and Russia's strategic buffer zone continues to shrink, Russia has chosen to maintain its security perimeter by way of war. However, this is contrary to the modern international order. The Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine has the potential to become the most important military conflict since the end of World War II [2]. As Kusa argues, this war is indeed a precursor to the transformation of the post-Cold War Western-dominated international system into a more pragmatic, chaotic, and multipolar [3].

The Russia-Ukraine War has been actively discussed and researched in academic circles. Current research focuses on the impact of the war, the causes of its outbreak, and the issue of national identity between Russia and Ukraine. The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War has been noted as a conflict between two major agricultural powers, and as the war intensifies, the food crisis will worsen, posing a food security challenge to many countries [4, 5]. For energy issues, studies have argued that crises such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict have raised questions about the reliability of non-renewable energy sources and will reorient the energy geopolitical system and accelerate the deployment of renewable energy through the decentralization of global energy sources [6]. The emergence of energy

problems in Europe would cut off dependence on Russian fossil fuels and accelerate the use of clean energy in the European Union (EU) [7]. Some academic studies in response to the outbreak point to the ongoing eastern expansion of NATO [2], Russia's belief that its state has the right to protect the interests of Russian-speaking people in Ukraine and Crimea [8], and historical reasons following the end of the Cold War [9]. In addition, the issue of national identity between Russia and Ukraine has also been the focus of academic research, mainly on Russia's articulated "Russian world" identity, attempts to unite with "pan-Eurasianism" to construct a Russian national identity [10], and to consider Ukraine as a post-Soviet state [11]. The majority of these studies have tended to focus on the Russian-Ukrainian identity as a post-Soviet state [11, 12]. Most of these studies have tended to look longitudinally at the causes and possible effects of the war in the context of Russia and Ukraine. In this state of affairs, academics are still deficient in thinking longitudinally about the history of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that has been compared. Therefore, this article attempts to explore why Russia is struggling to resolve the conflict with Ukraine this time by comparing the Crimean crisis with the current War in the Donbass.

The methodology of this article is based on the field of regional studies and uses a comparative case study methodology combined with academic support from a variety of literature. The references used in this paper are drawn from a variety of academic literature, official websites, and other documentary research. The study begins with an introduction to Russian geopolitical strategy and the theoretical foundations of realism, followed by an introduction to the background of the Crimean crisis and the 2022 War in Donbass, a comparison of the resolution of the Crimean crisis and the intractability of the current War in the Donbass, and finally an analysis of the reasons for the intractability of the war in the Donbass. By comparing the Crimean Crisis and the Donbass War. This study not only connects the two Russian-Ukrainian conflicts, but also bridges the gap in academic research on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in a longitudinal sense.

2. Realism and Russian Geopolitical Strategy

International conflicts are often caused by strategic objectives expressed as national interests, a typical example being Russia's war against Ukraine [13]. In both conflicts, Russia initiated the conflict and used a military approach to achieve strategic goals and national interests. Before presenting the two Russia-Ukraine conflicts, it is important to explain the doctrine and strategy that underpinned Russia's actions.

Morgenthau states that the international system is essentially an anarchic situation so war and conflict are inevitable [14]. Defending national interests and safeguarding them from infringement is also an important part of realism [14]. Thus, Russia's approach through war is essential to safeguard its national security interests.

Coined by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén in the early 20th century, geopolitics spread across Europe and became widely used after World War II [15]. In contemporary disputes, geopolitics encompasses the timing of analysis, preconditions, and the use of political power [16]. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited most of the Soviet territory and was also influenced by Soviet ideas. Russia's ultimate ideal was to re-emerge as a continental Eurasian empire. Putin constructed a new Russian identity as a major ultimate power that was popular among Russians and a reflection of his 'pan-Eurasianism' [16]. Russia has imperialist and centralist tendencies and wants to use its power to realise its dream of an empire in Eurasia. As NATO continued to expand to the east and the US imposed sanctions, Russia's geostrategic buffer zone dwindled and more and more colour revolutions broke out around it. Russia saw its conflict with Ukraine as part of a broader geopolitical struggle with the US and NATO [16]. This is because Brzezinski has pointed out that without Ukraine, Russia would no longer be a Eurasian empire [17]. Russia, therefore, wants to

control Ukraine and contain NATO's eastward expansion, while protecting its dream of being a great Eurasian empire.

3. Case Restoration: The Crimean Crisis 2014 and the Donbass War 2022

The Crimean Peninsula was incorporated into Ukraine in 1954 by a Soviet proposal and resolution. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been eager to regain Crimea to maintain its influence in the Black Sea while being able to recover lost territories [18]. Since then, the issue of Crimea's ownership has gradually arisen and expanded, and in late 2013, then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, under pressure from Russia, reneged on an election promise to sign a free trade agreement with the EU and attempted to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Community, sparking a political crisis in Ukraine. Large demonstrations broke out across Ukraine. After Yanukovich fled to Russia, the Ukrainian parliament removed Yanukovich from the presidency and made him step down. Russian politicians and media considered the leaders in Kiev to be Ukrainian nationalists who were violating the rights of the indigenous people living in Ukraine, especially the ethnic Russian people in the eastern part of the country [8]. Russia unites with the local parliament to decide on Crimea's independence by way of a referendum. In Putin's speech on Crimea, he stated that Crimea had always been an integral part of Russia in the minds of the people [19]. Crimea asked to join the Russian Federation. The UN General Assembly and the Ukrainian government expressed their opposition.

With the independence of Crimea, pro-Russian demonstrations erupted in other pro-Russian regions in the eastern part of the country, similarly demanding a referendum in Eastern Ukraine to join Russia. Two independent republics, Donetsk and Luhansk, were established in the Donbass region. The demonstrations then escalated into violent clashes, with clashes and numerous fierce battles between the Ukrainian army and the armed forces in eastern Ukraine. To stop the conflict in Ukraine, the "Normandy model", mediated by France and Germany, was used to call for dialogue between the parties. The Minsk Agreements were signed in Minsk on 5 September 2014 and the New Minsk Agreement was signed at the Minsk Summit on 11-12 February 2015 to prevent further escalation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The crisis in Crimea and the conflict in the Donbass region have thus been largely resolved by a politically negotiated regional ceasefire, with Crimea becoming part of the Russian occupation.

The two agreements remain the basis for peace efforts between the parties to the conflict and have not been effectively implemented [2]. This means there is no fundamental solution to the conflict in the Donbass and skirmishes continue to rage. This also lays the groundwork for a war in the Donbas in 2022. The situation in the region did not change much from the end of the Crimean crisis until the end of 2021. The new crisis that has erupted between the two countries dates back to the end of 2021. Since Vladimir Zelensky took office in 2019, he has advocated the democratization process politically, calling for more ordinary participation in politics; diplomatically, he has advocated that Ukraine should join NATO and the EU to further rely on European strength to help Ukraine develop; and in relations with Russia, he wants Russia to return its territory and end the conflict in the eastern part of the country. Zelensky signed a presidential decree to retake the Donbass region and visited the frontline in March 2021, while the Ukrainian army reinforced its deployment on the frontline and began frequent exchanges of fire with the Donbass forces. Russia's strategic goal is to maintain control over Ukraine and the approach taken may change over time, but the goal itself will not change [20]. Meanwhile, the two republics in the Donbass region have a high percentage of ethnic Russians, and Russia wants to occupy the region by referendum, as it did in 2014. Late 2021 saw a rise in troop deployments on both sides and further tensions in the east of the country. On 21 February 2022, Russia announced that it recognised the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and sent the military into the Donbass. On 24 February, Ukraine declared a state of war and broke off diplomatic

relations with Russia. The war continues to this day, during which the two sides have negotiated several times, but have not been able to reach a consensus.

Looking back at the two conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, both arose against the backdrop of Ukraine's desire to break away from Russian control and its desire to join NATO and the EU. The eastward expansion of NATO and the enlargement of the EU were also causes of tension in Russia. In both conflicts, Russia used various tactics to maintain its influence in and around Ukraine, consolidating its diplomatic and political clout. However, the War in the Donbas has so far failed to be resolved in a politically negotiated manner.

4. Why the Donbass War Is Difficult to Reconcile

The Crimean Crisis ended in 2014, but the War in the Donbass continues. There are similarities between the two conflicts, but why is the War in the Donbass so difficult to reconcile? Here is an analysis of the reasons why the War in the Donbass is so difficult to reconcile, compared to the Crimean Crisis.

4.1. Different Nature Between Two Wars

Russia's aim in the Crimean crisis was to seek territorial expansion and to maintain Russia's influence over Ukraine. Between November 2013 and February 2015, Russia adopted escalating tactics to destabilise Ukraine to influence the nature and prospects of the regime within Ukraine. These tactics included diplomatic and economic pressure, propaganda campaigns, and low-intensity proxy wars including military occupation. All of the tactics were used gradually, meaning that Russia sought to use, expand and consolidate its influence in all areas of Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy [20]. The result of the Crimean crisis was, as Russia expected, the occupation of Crimea and its resolution through the "Normandy model", as well as the diplomatic repression of Ukraine. In the War in Donbass, Russia still holds the same attitude as in Crimea, but with a greater focus on protecting its strategic buffer zone. Russia has repeatedly stated its opposition to NATO's continued eastward expansion, which is reducing Russia's security space. After Zelensky took office, he more actively sought to break away from Russian control. NATO has also stepped up its support for Ukraine, taking in and making Ukraine a "NATO Capacity Enhancement Partner" in 2020, which is tantamount to granting these countries associate member status in NATO. Russia hopes to maintain its current strategic buffer zone through the war in the Donbass. This means that territorial expansion is not Russia's main objective in this war.

Ukraine has shown different intentions in the two conflicts. At the time of the Crimean crisis, there was little effective response to Russia's encroachment on the Crimean Peninsula due to the political turmoil in the country. Russia occupied the Crimean Peninsula in a forcible but bloodless manner. Subsequently, separatists in the Donbass region (also widely believed to be members of Russia's military) similarly demanded independence. To guarantee territorial security, Ukraine sent its army to try to eliminate and expel the separatists. On the other hand, Ukraine wanted the support and help of the international community to resolve the crisis. Therefore, Ukraine is inclined towards a negotiated solution. In this War in Donbass, Ukraine, under Zelensky's leadership, has maintained a very high level of action and assertiveness. In addition, the Donbass region serves as Ukraine's heavy industrial zone, with a combined industrial output of 25% of Ukraine's total output [21]. This means it is difficult for Ukraine to give up the region easily.

Russia and Ukraine's aims for this War in Donbass differ greatly from those of the Crimean crisis. Ukraine has a strong desire to recover lost ground through war, while Russia is keen to maintain its influence in the region and protect its strategic buffer zone. A negotiated solution to the conflict is particularly difficult when there are major differences in objectives (they are summarized in Table 1).

Table 1: Industrial production by constituent territories of Ukraine in 2013.

(Date Source: Ukraine's statistical agency [21])

Rank	Name of the administrative unit	The volume of industrial products (Goods, services), millions of hryvnia, in 2013	The volume of industrial products (Goods, services), millions of USD, in 2013
1	Donetsk	205,697.2	25,218
2	Dnipropetrovsk	201,228.3	24,671
3	Zaporizhzhya	75,846.9	9,299
4	City of Kyiv	73,259.4	8,982
5	Luhansk	67,806	8,313
6	Poltava	65,466.7	8,026
7	Kharkiv	63,007.2	7,725
8	Kyiv	40,271.5	4,937
9	Lviv	30,786.8	3,774
10	Cherkasy	28,242.2	3,462
11	Odesa	25,041.1	3,070
12	Vinnitsya	22,739	2,788
13	Republic of Crimea	22,673.4	2,780
14	Sumy	22,391.2	2,745
15	Mykolayiv	21,702.3	2,661
16	Ivano-Frankivsk	20,472.1	2,510
17	Khmelnyskiy	16,615.7	2,037
18	Zhytomyr	15,672.8	1,921
19	Rivne	14,483.4	1,776
20	Kirovohrad	14,416.7	1,767
21	Chernihiv	14,085.3	1,727
22	Kherson	10,834	1,328
23	Volyn	10,185.3	1,249
24	Zakarpattia	9,290.7	1,139
25	Ternopil	7,612.4	933
26	City of Sevastopol	4,102.1	503
27	Chernivtsi	4,013.7	492

4.2. Different Strategies of the Governments in Power

Following the outbreak of the Crimean crisis, Ukraine was in a period of political turmoil. There was no clear leader in the country, which made Ukraine appear helpless in dealing with the Russian invasion. The parliament did not do much beyond providing ongoing funding for operations in the Donbass. Ukraine elected Peter Poroshenko as its new president on 25 May 2014, by holding early presidential elections. Upon taking office, Poroshenko wanted a swift end to the war and he combined hopes for reform with order and stability. He even said in his inaugural speech that order must come first: the time for inevitable positive change has come. To implement these principles, peace, security, and unity must come first [22]. The hope for change means that Ukraine can accelerate its plunge into the Western camp and reduce Russian influence on its domestic politics. Thus, even with the loss of

the Crimean Peninsula, Poroshenko still hopes to end the war expeditiously. Maintaining a stable order in the country, will help Ukraine's economic development and thus speed up the process of joining the EU. Poroshenko hopes that representatives from Ukraine, Russia, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe will be able to negotiate a peace plan at talks in Minsk. Thus, at the time of the Crimean crisis, Ukraine was the party that took the initiative to seek peace, hoping that the war would stop expeditiously.

In the War in Donbass, Zelensky's firm attitude makes it impossible for him to be the one to initiate peace. Zelensky's political leanings were more radical than Poroshenko's, advocating Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO as soon as possible and the defense of Ukraine's independence and sovereign integrity. On the diplomatic front, he has maintained close ties with the EU and has actively cooperated with the European Commission. It marked the beginning of his independent foreign policy, rather than a continuation of what his predecessors had done before him [23]. Following the War in Donbass, on 28 February 2022, Ukrainian President Zelensky signed Ukraine's application for EU membership. on 8 April, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, handed over a questionnaire to Ukraine to agree to Ukraine's EU candidacy. This meant Ukraine had determined a shift towards European values and principles [24]. With the support of the EU, Zelensky was more determined to go to war. As he said in his speech, Ukraine should only think about how to win, encompassing victory on the battlefield, on the political front, on the information confrontation, economically, and everywhere [25]. Moreover, he said that "the world should know that respect and order in international relations will be restored only when the Ukrainian flag returns to Crimea" [26]. With significant support from the West, Ukraine wants to take back not only the Donbass but also Crimea. This is the polar opposite of the active peace-seeking of 2014.

Russia has not performed in the War in Donbass as it did in 2014, taking control of the Crimean Peninsula in the short term. On the contrary, Russia is embroiled in an ongoing war with the support of NATO. Therefore, the attitude of the Ukrainian authorities' government is responsible for the difficulty of reconciling this war.

4.3. Different Levels of Support from Western Countries

Looking back at the two Russia-Ukraine conflicts, the level of support from the West has influenced the course of both conflicts.

At the time of the Crimean crisis, although the West imposed sanctions on Russia, these were more of a non-physical nature. All Western countries opposed Russia's appropriation of Ukraine by way of condemnation. The United States, in conjunction with other members of the G8, froze Russia's membership. This condemnation of Russia has had no real impact and is therefore widely regarded as a Western policy of "appeasement". Ukraine was not effectively supported during the Crimean crisis, but instead signed the Minsk Agreements with Russia at the instigation of France and Germany.

After the outbreak of the War in Donbass, however, international opinion changed rapidly. The vast majority of the international community began to show solidarity or support for Ukraine in practical ways. For the West, this War in Donbass is far different from the Crimean Crisis, which was an invasion of a sovereign state by another sovereign state by force. This Russian invasion of Ukraine is the most significant threat to the liberal international order since the end of the Cold War [27]. Russia's understanding of state power diverges significantly from that of the liberal international order. Russia wants power to play a greater role in international relations than the rules and laws that are emphasized in today's international order [13]. Countries that wish to preserve today's international order have offered support to Ukraine against Russia's imperialism and aggression. International organizations such as the EU and NATO put pressure on Russia and provided aid to Ukraine. This means that Ukraine's entry into the Western sphere of influence will become an irreversible fact. The UN General Assembly has repeatedly passed resolutions demanding that Russia

withdraw its troops and stop the invasion; the US has imposed even harsher economic sanctions on Russia; and EU countries have provided Ukraine with arms, ammunition, and other logistical support. Russia is no longer fighting just Ukraine, but the international community that supports it.

In addition, in response to the Crimean crisis, the “Normandy model” of dialogue and negotiation, promoted by France and Germany, successfully helped to resolve the conflict. After the Crimean crisis, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel led the diplomatic efforts in Ukraine and played an important role in gaining support for sanctions (and their reinstatement) against Russia. Played an important role, but did not actively provide military assistance to Ukraine or commit Ukraine to EU membership [28]. However, after the outbreak of the War in Donbass, Russian-Ukrainian relations became one of the defining factors of the current (chaotic) order in the Euro-Atlantic region [28]. As a result of Russia’s general distrust rooted in EU and NATO policies and Russia’s desire to modify the Western international order, Germany no longer wished to tolerate Moscow monolithically and the relationship between the two countries seemed to change more fundamentally [28]. By changing its stance of not providing arms support after this conflict, while strengthening its defenses to maintain the country’s freedom and democracy, Germany would increase defense spending and boost its armaments, while creating strategic reserves of natural gas and reducing its dependence on Russian gas.

Russia did not foresee that this war would be met with so much resistance. The reason is that Russia’s invasion by force has violated the security boundaries of European countries, which are finding it difficult to defend themselves. The three Nordic countries have formally submitted applications to NATO for military guarantees. This has instead put Russia in a more passive situation.

4.4. Differences in Ethnic Composition

The different ethnic identities resulting from the different ethnic compositions of the two conflict areas also had an impact on the difficulty of ending this war. According to official Ukrainian data, the Crimean Peninsula is almost 60% Russian, while the Donbass region is only 40% Russian [21]. The number of people who support Russian as an official language in the Crimean Peninsula is over 90% [21]. Crimea has been granted the status of an autonomous republic by Ukraine. Due to the difference in ethnic share and language support, Crimea’s national identity is nevertheless unresolved. It makes the local national identity of Crimea and the national identity of Ukraine opposed to each other. When Russia excluded its forces from taking control of Crimea, it joined Russia through a referendum due to its national identity and sentiment towards Russia.

This was followed by the Donbass region, where pro-Russian elements began to emulate the Crimean referendum. However, due to ethnic Ukrainians and their national identity with Ukraine, the Donbass region was not able to break away from Ukrainian control. In the 2022 Donbass War, the region tried to secede from Ukraine through a referendum but was unsuccessful. The region’s sense of national identity with Ukraine also dictates that Russia is unlikely to end the war anytime soon.

5. The Future and Response of the Donbass War

The War in Donbass has been going on for over a year now and there have been several larger battles fought between Russia and Ukraine, but the two sides have always been in a state of agitation. What is beyond doubt is that this war has changed the world landscape forever and Russia’s development will be subject to harsher sanctions regardless of the outcome of the war. When war becomes a long-term drain on a country’s energy, negotiation may be the solution. The War in the Donbass will eventually lead to dialogue and negotiation between Russia and Ukraine, but who will compromise and when will require constant attention to the course of the war.

As the War in the Donbass enters a state of protracted attrition, the question of how the conflict can be resolved through negotiation has become the most important concern since the outbreak of the War in the Donbass. The “Normandy model” is no longer being taken seriously, China may have a huge role to play in the latter stages of the war.

This is even though China still largely maintains apparent policy neutrality, which means that it does not in principle take sides between Russia and Ukraine. But Western countries have repeatedly pressured China to put pressure on Russia to end the war as soon as possible. US Secretary of State Blinken emphasized that China should use its relationship with Russia to put pressure on Russia to defend the international order and principles that China supports [29]. In a dialogue with Chinese leader Xi Jinping on 7 April 2023, European Commission President von der Leyen said that Xi Jinping was willing to speak with Zelensky to promote peace between Russia and Ukraine [30]. Faced with pressure from international public opinion, China had to adopt a neutral attitude towards the Russo-Ukrainian war. In order to protect China’s existing international image, China has begun to think about its relations with Russia. Putin has told Xi Jinping that he understands his concerns about the Russia-Ukraine war, which means that China has subtly abandoned its support for Russia’s position [31].

In addition, China has tried to use the war to improve its international image. Xi Jinping has been trying to position China as a potential mediator in the Russia-Ukraine conflict because of its economic influence on Russia. Analysts have noted that China aspires to play its role as a great power and win support among Western countries through its role as a mediator to be seen as a global leader. China has repeatedly called for an end to the war without directly criticising Russia and has avoided directly supporting Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, especially within the international community. China has attempted to develop a unique and coherent position of its own. China’s position is one of objectivity and impartiality and a desire to create an effective regional security structure to resolve conflicts in Europe [32].

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has shown that the Crimean crisis and the Donbass War, although sharing the same background, have been handled in completely different ways for a variety of reasons. By comparing the two Russia-Ukraine conflicts, this study aims to provide information on the two Russia-Ukraine conflicts and to explain why the Crimean Crisis was resolved in the short term while the Donbass War was difficult to deal with. The reasons for the difficulty of negotiating this war come from three main sources. The first is the different nature of the war between the two conflicts. The second is the different diplomatic strategies of the authorities’ governments, which is particularly evident in Ukraine. The different strategies and diplomatic attitudes of Poroshenko and Zelensky influenced the war. It will be difficult for Russia to achieve its strategic objectives as easily as it did during the Crimean crisis. In addition, changes in Western support for Ukraine have also influenced the Donbass War. When the West tangibly supports Ukraine, this war will put Russia under great pressure. Finally, the different national identities arising from the different ethnic composition of the two conflict zones has directly contributed to the resistance Russia has faced in fighting in the Donbass. The Donbass War is a huge disruption to the world order. By analysing the external pressures on China and its desire to raise its international profile, this paper suggests that China’s ability to mediate the Donbass War as a third party would facilitate the end of this war.

Building on previous research, this paper compares the two Russian-Ukrainian conflicts and shows why the war in the Donbas is difficult to end. It also shows that China, if it could act as a mediator, would facilitate the negotiation process and bring the war to an end as soon as possible. The analysis of the reasons for the difficulty of ending the war is still inadequate, especially regarding the “Normandy model” and whether China could be involved as a mediator in the resolution of the war.

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