



THE GOOD THE BAD & THE UGLY

EUROPEAN SECURITY - AUTUMN 2015

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European security (autumn 2015): the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Over the past three months, we have seen several significant developments in the broad field of European security. Some seem hopeful but, on closer examination, are ambiguous; others are clearly disturbing. In order to give shape to the reflections below and with apologies to the creator of the Spaghetti Western, they are presented under the title (with some qualifications) of one of his masterpieces, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*.

The Good, maybe? - “Minsk II(b)” and the Ukraine crisis.

At the beginning of September, the crisis in Ukraine, after 18 months, bore the hallmarks of a frozen conflict in the making. Russia was unmoved on the annexation of Crimea and its covert support for the rebellion in eastern Ukraine; international attempts to resolve the conflict (the Minsk agreement in the autumn of 2014 and its second iteration in February 2015) had so far failed to gain traction.¹

Then, rather mysteriously, the cease-fire seemed to hold. This allowed for diplomatic progress. A summit meeting in the “Normandy format” (Ukraine and Russia with Germany and France) in Paris on 2 October was characterised by the Ukrainian President as a move from “a cease-fire to a truce”. Agreement was reached on an Addendum (including the withdrawal of heavy weapons) to the existing Package of Measures (Minsk II), in order to at last start implementing Minsk I. On 6 October, the Donbas rebels announced they would delay their planned local elections to the new year, which would allow for a three month space for further attempts to resolve the conflict.

These developments are important enough to deserve a name – let’s call them “Minsk II(b)” - though many difficult issues remain. The cease-fire is still fragile, with increasing violations since early November and an escalating trade war between Ukraine and Russia. Outside the formal political process, the point of contact between the parties to the dispute, the Trilateral Contact Group, has yet to reach agreement on the scope of an amnesty, the release of hostages, the constitutional changes involved in the “decentralisation” of the Ukrainian state, and, above all, the restoration of the government’s authority on its border. But at least it’s a start, with the icing on the cake in the form of election (by 177 votes) to a seat on the UN Security Council. Now Ukraine can eyeball its tormentor across the table in New York.

After more than 18 months of extreme turmoil arising from Russia’s intervention, conditions inside Ukraine are still precarious. With an economy in need of re-invention, a fractious political culture and a state hollowed out by corruption, it is not surprising that a serious humanitarian emergency exists. One statistic tells the story: in August, 1.4 million people were displaced inside the country, and 1.1 million were refugees abroad.² But some green shoots have emerged recently. On the economic front, a

¹ Keatinge, P. (2015), *The European Union and the Ukraine Crisis*, Dublin: Institute of International and European Affairs.

² The humanitarian situation is regularly summarised in the European Commission’s Echo factsheets, bit.ly/echo-fs

deal on the state's debt was at last concluded with the IMF on 28 August. Gas supply has also been confirmed for the coming winter, a reflection of Russia's weakened leverage in a depressed energy market and the EU's policy of encouraging greater diversity in the supply lines. The government has also had some success in advancing reforms (the judiciary, the security service, the sale of state assets and the first stage of the constitutional reform bill).

The focus of political attention has been on the local elections, on 25 October and 15 November, regarded as a crucial test of the new regime's democratic credentials. A small army of international observers, organised by the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, found some aspects of the new electoral law obscure and criticised specific instances of fraud and a media often too tightly controlled by economic interests. However, the overall verdict was positive; the turnout was on a par with those of European democracies, and a wide diversity of parties were represented. Not surprisingly, some government incumbents were punished (the prime minister even withdrew his party just before the first round), but there was little sign of alternatives triggering a landslide in opposition.

So what do these fragments of "good news" tell us about the prospects for this conflict? And why did they occur at this particular juncture? A case of conflict exhaustion perhaps? Given what they have endured, that explanation might strike a chord with many Ukrainian citizens; however, the trigger-happy minorities on either side of the argument have not gone away. Another explanation might point to the increasing resilience of the new regime, now having survived a long term in the school of hard knocks.

But we also have to consider the role of the big neighbour. Two rather different explanations can be found here. Some observers see the changes as a result of the failure of Russian policy. The insurrection in Donbas has reached its territorial limits, below what had been expected or regarded as a viable entity. Further progress would require an overt invasion and occupation, with unacceptable military and political costs. On the other hand, there is the view that what we are witnessing is just a tactical pause by a master of improvisation and risk-taking. These two explanations are not quite as opposed as might appear at first sight. If Russia is indeed floundering in the long term, in the short term it still has the capacity to keep one step ahead of the chase.

The Bad, surely - the storms of the Arab winter.

At the same time as the Ukraine crisis took a modest turn for the better the chaotic reaction to the failed Arab Spring of 2011 was moving in the opposite direction. The emergence of the so-called Islamic State movement (IS) in the summer of 2014 has now become the critical element in the Syrian civil war, itself the focus of the continuing downward spiral into chaos in the Middle East region as a whole.³

As far as European security is concerned, the situation in Syria, together with the surrounding turmoil created by revolutionary Islam from Bamako to Kabul, now has two very negative consequences for European countries. First, the flow of refugees into Europe, already a serious difficulty for the "frontline" states on the northern seaboard of the Mediterranean, has not only increased in volume, but it has also spilled over its previous boundaries. In effect, the "frontline" has broken over recent months, with the long march of thousands of refugees into the heartlands of Europe, a phenomenon reminiscent of the period following the end of the Second World War. The inadequacy of existing policies of asylum, free travel within the Schengen area and humanitarian assistance has been exposed, both at the national and EU levels.

The second negative development was underlined in the jihadist terrorist attack in Paris on 13 November, which in its scale and psychological impact is bound to influence security policy, not only in France but throughout Europe. 'Homeland security', particularly with respect to intelligence sharing, is naturally a major focus of attention, but so too are the foreign policy and military aspects of the main source of these difficulties, the conflict in Syria.

³ For a concise summary, see Khedery, A. (2015), Iraq in Pieces: Breaking Up to Stay Together, Foreign Affairs, Volume 94, Number 6, November-December 2015.

In that context the last few months have seen a third change which has a major bearing on the agenda of European security - the increasing involvement of Russia in Syria. Russia has long had a military base in the country and has supported the Assad regime since the beginning of the civil war, but what is new is the military build-up over the summer leading to the start of an intensive air campaign against the regime's opponents on 30 September. Given that the latter included groups supported by the West, and including European states (especially France), it was not surprising that Russian policy was seen as a destabilising factor. The initial response of a pre-scheduled meeting of NATO ministers on 8 October included a reassurance to Turkey of the Article V commitment, but also a strengthening of its deterrent policy, in the doubling of the reaction force in Eastern Europe and the Baltics.

On the other hand, the new Russian activism could be interpreted as enabling a diplomatic opening in Syria. This view rests on the clear common interest in reaching a settlement in Syria, which would reduce or at least contain the contagion of revolutionary Islam. Russia has every reason to take this seriously, with a large Muslim community and exposure to actual or potential jihadist influence along its extensive southern border, from the Caucasus to Afghanistan.

Looking at Russian policy in the round, we can see a contrast in style between its role in the Ukraine crisis and in Syria. The former rests on a largely covert manipulation of ambiguous kinship ties in the near abroad; the latter is a deliberate display of expeditionary exuberance on the global stage. But both belong to the same project – the rehabilitation of Russia as a “Great Power”, ideally in a multipolar world alongside the United States and China.⁴

Bearing in mind the important but ambiguous presence of Russia in both Ukraine and Syria, is there a linkage between the two issues? The logic of linkage will have an instinctive appeal to the major powers - Moscow and Washington will decide over the heads of lesser actors such as Kiev, or, dare we say it, Berlin or Brussels. One version of this argument sees the EU and its member states paying for Russian cooperation in Syria with the withdrawal of sanctions in Ukraine.⁵ However, for another analyst, the pressure of obligation may flow in the other direction; Moscow concedes in Ukraine in order to play at the top table in Syria.⁶

At this stage, however, it is too early to say who owes what to whom. The effect of Russia's military campaign is not clear; diplomatic efforts to establish a rapprochement with Russia over Syria are only starting. Meetings at ministerial level – the “Vienna process” – took place on 30 October and 14 November. These involve attempting to link two very loose coalitions; if enhanced by a burst of summitry following the attacks in Paris on 13 November, they are vulnerable to incidents such as the downing of a Russian plane on 24 November. This looks like the beginning of a long and difficult process.

In short, it is perhaps wiser to acknowledge that the logic of contingency trumps the logic of linkage at this stage. In the Syrian quagmire, which has already sucked in a bewildering range of states and non-state groups with their own, often contradictory agendas, unpleasant surprises can be expected. The two recent examples of “blowback” – the downing of a Russian airliner on 31 October and the massacre in Paris on 13 November - make the point all too vividly. And where is Ukraine in all of this? Over the coming months the protagonists there will no doubt shape their perceptions, expectations and negotiating tactics with a sideways glance at the evolving conflict in Syria. Not so much linkage (which implies a deal) as the prudent exercise of peripheral vision.

⁴ For a recent detailed study of Russian foreign policy, see Lo, B. (2015), *Russia and the New World Disorder*, Chatham House, London and Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D. C.

⁵ See, for example, Michta, A. A. (2015), *Putin's Pianos*, *The American Interest*, 5 October 2015.

⁶ Malachenko, A. (2015), *Le pari syrien de Moscou*, *Le Monde diplomatique*, Novembre 2015.

The Ugly, sadly - the European Union on the rack.

Turning the focus on the European Union and its Member States does not reveal a pretty sight. Sharp differences over the refugee crisis and, since 13 November vulnerability to jihadist terrorism, have swamped the political agenda to the extent that the Ukraine crisis has been almost invisible outside that country during the last three months. Partly this is due to the media's furious swarm to the biggest honey pot on the table, but it may also reflect more fundamental tensions within the EU itself.

The irony is that the Ukraine issue is where there has been some evidence of the EU's capacity to act. On 14 September, an important element of the sanctions policy was extended for a further six months.⁷ There was no row (and hence little to no attention in the media). The encouragement of the reform process in Kiev continued, if not hard or fast enough for some reformers; the lack of the ultimate inducement – the clear prospect of eventual EU membership – is keenly felt.⁸

Yet there is also evidence of strains in the policy making process, and there seem to be doubts whether the institutional structure of the Common Foreign and Security Policy can cope. Some delegations feel that they are not being consulted adequately; there is bound to be a question whether the “vanguard” – the German-French duo in the Normandy format - is in step with the collectivity in the Council.

Arguably this reflects a much broader question. Is the current accumulation of crises (euro, security, refugees, Brexit) heading towards a perfect storm that threatens the Union as a whole?⁹ European integration was developed in order to transfer disputes from the battlefield to the committee room, but the bitterness and intransigence of current debates within the Council, and the rise of Europhobia outside it, may threaten the sustainability of this approach.

Recent changes in specific Member States add to the gloom. On 25 October, a general election in Poland has led to a government with an almost instinctive tendency to make life difficult for both Brussels and Berlin. It is likely to be equally ill-disposed towards Moscow, but may choose to display this negativism more in the context of NATO than of the EU. Meanwhile, in Germany, the Chancellor's leadership has come under unusually sharp attack over the refugees issue. The overthrow of Angela Merkel, the “indispensable European”¹⁰ (and no more so than in the Ukraine crisis) would leave a very large gap in the field of European security.

Finally, there is the promise of a wild card in the Netherlands. Following a citizen's initiative, a new procedure requiring 300,000 signatures, a non-binding referendum on the EU's Association Agreement with Ukraine will be held on 6 April next year. This will be the first time a foreign policy issue other than enlargement will be put to a popular vote. Non-binding it may be, but it looks like another nail in the coffin of representative democracy, and perhaps of the development of European integration.¹¹ And as anyone from a ‘referendum country’ will appreciate, the result may reflect something other than the question posed.

Where does Ireland stand now?

The above analysis of the current state of play in European security can perhaps be summed up in one word – ambiguity. The search for solutions in Syria is underway, but the outcome is uncertain; in Ukraine it is not clear whether “Minsk II(b)” will merely kick the can into 2016 or help unfreeze the conflict. And what about Crimea - the elephant in the freezer?¹²

⁷ Timeline – EU restrictive measure in response to the crisis in Ukraine, www.consilium.europa.eu

⁸ Mikhail Minakov (2015), Letter from Kiev, in Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe, Carnegie Europe, carnegieeurope.eu

⁹ The question is posed in a broad historical analysis in Simms, B. and Less, T. (2015) A crisis without end: The disintegration of the European project., *New Statesman* 6-12 November 2015.

¹⁰ *The Economist*, 7-13 November 2015.

¹¹ Lehne, S. (2015), Are Referenda Blocking the EU's Progress? Carnegie Europe. CarnegieEurope.eu

¹² The elephant is stirring; on 22 November the electricity supply to Crimea was cut, amid mutual recriminations.

Some clarity may emerge over the coming months but at the moment we are faced with a range of urgent questions: what is to be done about the refugee issue – humanitarian relief, asylum laws and regulations, the numbers to be welcomed? How do we balance the restrictions of homeland security with civil and human rights? How do we avoid being recruited into the mindset of a “war of civilisations”?

A further issue has arisen following France’s decision on 16 November to invoke the EU’s mutual assistance clause, Article 42.7, for the first time. The following day, all 28 defence ministers agreed on a demonstration of solidarity which prompts the question – will IS help keep the EU in business? The government, reading the article in its entirety, has taken the view that a particular type of limited military assistance is compatible with the policy of military neutrality; the suggestion is to provide some relief for overstretched French commitments to UN peacemaking commitments. That proposition has been attacked as an unconstitutional betrayal of (military) neutrality.¹³ Although this issue has intermittently proved to be problematic for Ireland’s involvement in European integration for fifty years or more, it looks like a distraction from the big picture at this juncture.

And what is the big picture? We are faced with two simultaneous threats – the collapse of political authority in the Middle East and the undermining of the European security order. In these circumstances, Ireland’s overriding foreign policy interest is the preservation – and in some respects, the restoration – of “multilateralism and a rule based international system”.¹⁴ The UN is the institutional focus of this system at the global level; for us the EU, the Council of Europe and the OSCE also represent our commitment to multilateralism. In this context it is arguable that the central problem is how to deal with IS and how to engage with Russia. Revolutionary jihadists never accepted the rules of a multilateral system and by definition never will, but until quite recently Russia seemed to. And Russia matters because of its size and potential.

Now, however, Putin’s Russia, while loudly claiming it is keeping the faith, has broken important rules by annexing Crimea. It has adopted a deliberately contrarian stance, not just in its world view and general foreign policy orientation, but right across the spectrum of values projected by its government. This meets with broad popular support, so far oblivious to Russia’s long-term weakness, the failure to diversify and modernise its economic base.

Foreign policy cooperation with Russia is thus likely only in a limited number of cases, such as nuclear proliferation in Iran and now its presence in Syria, where Russia sees its own narrow interests at stake. That is unlikely, however, to provide a sufficient basis for the development of a predictable and positive overall partnership. The mistrust recently engendered in official channels of contact has made relationships with Russia more difficult than at any time since the end of the Cold War, but an isolated Russia is not in anyone’s interest. We have to engage with Russia at all levels; if formal diplomatic exchanges are unproductive, the channels of “soft power” – for example through the networking of civil society groups in the fields of culture and education - can take up some of the slack.

That is a matter for the long haul. Meanwhile, we will have to be very clear what is acceptable in the relationship with Russia. If there is to be any linkage in the future, offering up Ukraine as a sacrifice in order to win the prospect of a short-term, limited relief in Syria looks to this author like a very poor bargain.¹⁵

¹³ The important qualification “military” tends to get lost in these debates, and the usage of the term “neutrality” is correspondingly inflated.

¹⁴ See the annual address of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Charlie Flanagan, at the UN General Assembly on 1 October 2015, www.dfa.ie

¹⁵ Dempsey, J. (2015), The Lure of Returning to Business as Usual With Russia, in Judy Dempsey’s Strategic Europe, Carnegie Europe, carnegieeurope.eu. For a slightly more nuanced view, see Gideon Rachman, A case for rapprochement with Russia, Financial Times, 24 November 2015.



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