

Geneva agreement on Ukraine: Can it defuse tensions?

Rajorshi Roy

April 24, 2014

The April 17 Geneva joint statement issued by Russia, US, Europe and Ukraine has outlined steps to de-escalate the prevailing tensions. These include disbanding of illegal armed groups and vacating government buildings, amnesty for protestors and initiating a national dialogue to bring in constitutional reforms. The development comes against the backdrop of civil war spectre in Ukraine after pro-Russian Ukrainian supporters had demanded independence and occupied government buildings in several eastern Ukrainian cities. In all of this, the threat of a Russian military intervention loomed large.

While the ‘compromise’, as put forth by Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, is a welcome development in so far it helps to diffuse the potential confrontation yet it does raise two pertinent questions: What made the key players arrive at such an agreement? and can this deal be implemented?

What made the key players sign the agreement?

As the events over the last few days unfolded, an agreement involving the key protagonists was expected:

Russia

Russia’s stake in the ongoing confrontation has been to retain its sphere of influence in Ukraine since this is an existential issue for it. Its support to the secessionist movement was a possible pressure tactic designed to bring other players to the negotiation table and strengthen its own position rather than use it as a pretext for military intervention. An invasion will only complicate matters. Ukraine is not Crimea and nationalist sentiments even in the pro-Russian eastern Ukrainian cities run high. An intrusion will fast-track Ukraine’s NATO membership and EU integration, will result in wide ranging western economic sanctions and possibly lead Moscow to international political isolation. As such Russia retains a number of key economic, political and cultural leverages to influence stability and major outcomes in the country.

Nevertheless, the Crimean events did not appear to deter the 'Western' endorsed Kiev government from curtailing its engagement with it. Therefore, Russia's objective appears to gain maximum concessions from both the 'West' and Ukraine in return for a modicum of stability in its neighbourhood. This includes seeking to restore Ukraine's status as a neutral country, establishing federal principles of governance and elections of regional governors and preserving the status of Russian language. The Geneva agreement and subsequent political statements from Kiev seem to address a majority of these core concerns. Moscow can now bide its time and let events run their course, being aware that it retains all the decisive strings in this standoff.

Ukraine

The secessionist movement had glaringly highlighted the shortcomings of Ukrainian armed forces to maintain order. The Kiev government faced an acute dilemma of using troops against fellow Ukrainians and thereby run the risk of popular backlash. It would have also given Moscow an alibi to intervene and protect pro-Russians. However, inability to contain the secessionist sentiments could threaten the unity of Ukrainian state. Faced with limited options, the only feasible action seemed to strike a deal in order to preserve the territorial integrity of the country.

United States

The de-escalation will suit the US as well since having invested so much political capital in the crisis, a Russian military intervention will force it to react in equal measure. But does it have the appetite or core interests to justify such a militarily engagement? A military standoff will also expose the fault lines within NATO. The alliance is a relic of the Cold War when there was unanimity on Russia being the principal adversary. However, many of its members do not share the present Russian threat and have expressed their uneasiness in directly confronting Moscow. The current agreement also keeps the door open for a future US-Russia collaboration on several mutually beneficial international issues.

European Union

The EU has from the beginning been averse to a military standoff with Russia. A Russian armed intervention will force it to impose varied economic sanctions. At a time when the Eurozone recovery is at a nascent stage, any disruption of ties with one of its largest trade and energy partners can be catastrophic. A confrontation will also reveal contradictions within the Union on how to deal with its biggest neighbour. A diplomatic agreement gives all parties some time to reassess the situation and work around a dangerous flashpoint which appeared to be reaching a point of non-return.

Can the Deal Work?

The first impression is that the agreement has the potential to calm down the volatile atmosphere. This has been the only occasion when Moscow and Kiev have found common meeting ground since President Yanukovich's government was overthrown in February.

The key element that stood out in the joint statement is the omission of any reference to Crimea. This possibly heralds the de facto recognition of Crimea being a part of Russia and the West stepping aside this issue in its dealings with President Putin.

However, as always the devil lies in the details and several issues have started emerging: the refusal of pro Russian activists to vacate government buildings along with Russia and US sparring over the scope of 'armed groups'. So on one hand, Russia has called for disarming all armed groups including Ukrainian nationalists who had helped overthrow the democratically elected government. On the other hand, the US has called for disarming only pro-Russian 'militants' in the east.

Meanwhile, sabre-rattling has continued on both sides of the 'East' vs. 'West' divide. NATO Secretary General's 'Doorstep Statement' of deploying additional troops in the ex-Warsaw Pact member states is a strong provocation. Similarly, President Putin has reminded the world of State Duma's authorisation to deploy troops in Ukraine. His use of the term '*Novorossija*' or New Russia, which denotes Russia's expansion of territories after its war with the Ottoman Empire, while referring to eastern and southern Ukraine apart from the call for stepping up the dialogue on the future of Transnistria can have its own implications.

The Geneva agreement can be the first step towards de-escalating tensions, though there are innumerable complexities and challenges at work. While all protagonists have shown a willingness to come to the negotiation table, the challenge lies in balancing Russia's core interests with that of geopolitical calculations of the 'West'. At the end of the day, this is not just an existential but also an emotive issue for the Kremlin. The recent killing of pro-Russian supporters in Slovyansk during the Easter reveals the fragile nature of this agreement.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.