

DIRE STRAIT: ON RUSSIA-UKRAINE SEA CLASH

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed countries on India's interests

Russia's capture of three [Ukrainian naval ships](#) and over 20 crew members in the disputed Azov Sea has refocused international attention on the conflict on Europe's eastern corridors. The rapid escalation in tensions following the flare-up is evident. Kiev has declared martial law and demanded that the sailors be treated as prisoners of war. A court in Russian-annexed Crimea, meanwhile, has ordered many of them to be held in pre-trial detention, charging them with illegally entering its territorial waters. Ukraine insists that the patrol of the Kerch Strait, where the vessels were impounded, was authorised under a bilateral agreement with Moscow. A new bridge over the strait that connects mainland Russia with Crimea has raised concerns about Moscow's greater control and influence in the region. The latest incident coincides with the anniversary of the November 2013 Maidan Square protests in Ukraine demanding integration with Europe, which was the prelude to Russia's invasion of Ukraine's Crimea in 2014. The protracted conflict has so far claimed about 10,000 lives and displaced millions, and no lasting resolution is in sight. The 2014-15 Minsk peace accords prohibited air strikes and heavy artillery firing. But the dispute has dragged on into a smouldering low-intensity combat. The Ukraine-Russia conflict has also widened religious schisms. The independence granted to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Russian entity in October was criticised by Moscow. In turn, the election this month of the legislatures of two breakaway enclaves of Kiev, with Moscow's endorsement, drew criticism from Ukraine, leading European powers and the U.S. as violations of the Minsk accords.

There has been renewed Western [diplomatic pressure](#) since the weekend's skirmishes, with the UN Security Council and NATO calling on Moscow and Kiev to de-escalate tensions. But besides forcing Russian President Vladimir Putin to toughen his rhetoric *vis-à-vis* the big powers, the hardships from the economic sanctions since Crimea's occupation have achieved little by way of confidence-building in the region. European powers are divided between those advocating greater diplomatic engagement with the Kremlin and others wanting to press with further sanctions to punish perceived Russian political interference. But there has been little appreciation of the provocation for Moscow from NATO's continued expansion into the former Eastern Europe and the erstwhile USSR. The geopolitical imperative of greater engagement with Moscow has never been more urgent, as hawks in the U.S. administration make no secret of their preference for confrontation over dialogue. The recent escalations could serve well the leaders of both Russia and Ukraine to divert attention from the sagging popularity levels at home. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko faces a general election next year, which, it is widely forecast, he will lose. But the humanitarian situation arising from the continuing conflict brooks no delay in arriving at a speedy resolution.

Maharashtra's proposal on reservation for Marathas is bound to invite judicial scrutiny

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