

# THE UKRAINE CONFLICT: A SYSTEMIC AND ESCALATION MODEL APPROACH TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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## Keywords

## Article History

Received: 01 January, 2025

Accepted: 21 February, 2025

Published: 31 March, 2025

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## Abstract

*This study analyzes the Ukraine conflict through the lenses of the system theory and conflict escalation models to understand its underlying dynamics and explore potential pathways to resolution. The systemic model helps identify the complex interplay of political, economic, and security structures among global and regional actors, while conflict escalation theory traces the intensification of hostilities over time. By mapping key escalation triggers—such as NATO expansion, territorial disputes, and information warfare—the research highlights how the conflict evolved from political tension to full-scale war. The study proposes de-escalation strategies rooted in multilateral diplomacy, trust-building mechanisms, and conflict transformation frameworks. Ultimately, the paper offers a holistic view of the Ukraine conflict, emphasizing the importance of early intervention, balanced power negotiations, and sustainable peacebuilding efforts.*

The Spectrum of Research

## INTRODUCTION

The antecedents of the current crisis can be traced back to the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991. After the breakup, Ukraine, which was previously part of the Soviet Union, became an independent state. Russia, on the other hand, became the successor state to Soviet Union. Despite the independence of Ukraine, Russia continued to play an important role in the domestic politics of the country (Mankoff, 2012, p. 227).

In February 2010, pro-Russian candidate Victor Yanukovich was elected as the president in elections that were seen as free and fair by foreign election observers (Pan, 2010). In November 2013, opposition leaders organized large demonstrations in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev after President Yanukovich refused to pen an agreement on closer ties with the European Union (EU) and instead sought greater partnership with Russia (Traynor & Grytsenko, 2013). The opposition demonstrators claimed that a

shift towards greater integration with Europe was more beneficial for the Ukrainian future.

To ease off the pressure on the Yanukovich government, the Russian government agreed to buy a portion of Ukrainian debt. It also reduced the prices of gas supplied to Ukraine by a third. The protests, however, gained even greater momentum after agreement with Russia (Walker, 2013). The government resorted to restrictive legal and administrative measures to pacify the protestors. However, violence broke out as a result of the government action. Close to a hundred people died in February 2014. President Yanukovich had to flee before the demonstrators entered the presidential palace (Booth & Englund, 2014).

As a response to the events in Kiev, pro-Russian separatists took over key buildings in the capital of the eastern Ukrainian region of Crimea in late February. Meanwhile, the Russian Parliament authorized

President Putin to use military force for the protection of Russian interests in Ukraine. Soon afterwards a referendum was held in Crimea in which 97 percent of voters decided in favor of Crimean secession to Russia. The referendum was criticized in Ukraine and in the west. Subsequently, President Putin signed a bill to integrate Crimea into Russia (Luhn, 2014).

In April 2014, pro-Russian separatists emerged in other cities in eastern Ukraine. In the subsequent Ukrainian military action against the separatists around 50 people died. Consequently, pro-Russian separatists declared independence in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (Herszenhorn & Roth, 2014). Meanwhile, Petro Poroshenko was elected Ukrainian president in elections that were only held in areas outside of the control of pro-Russian separatists. For the next few months, fighting raged between the Russian-backed separatists and the Ukrainian forces in the eastern part of the country with either party blaming the other for the increasing civilian casualties (Dearden, 2014).

Amidst the violence, negotiations were held at the highest level on two different occasions. In September 2014, Ukrainian government and the separatists signed a truce in Minsk, Belarus. In February 2015, the EU and Ukrainian leaders agreed on the broader principles of engagement with Russia for seeking a diplomatic solution to the crisis. The UN reported that despite the claims of ceasefire, by March 2015, more than 6,000 people had been killed in the hostilities in eastern Ukraine (Chonghaile, 2015).

### **Parties to the Conflict**

Party A: Ukrainian Government in Kiev; it is backed by the EU and the US.

Party B: Russian government; it is supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine.

### **Major Issues of Contention and Respective desirable outcomes:**

The key issue for Ukrainian government is restoring and protecting its territorial integrity (McElroy, 2014). Currently, Crimea has been annexed by Russia. Further, part of its eastern territory is under the control of the separatists. Further, to legitimize the arrangement, referendums were held in both the

regions that upheld separation from Ukraine. Ukrainian government, the EU and the US considered the referendums to be a sham (Denyer & Nemstova, 2014).

Ukrainian government considers the Russian interference in Ukrainian politics a violation of the sovereignty of the country. The administration believes that Russian legislation and action over Crimea and its support to the separatists in eastern Ukraine is tantamount to the breach of Ukrainian sovereignty (Roberts, 2014). The Russian government, however, claims that its involvement in the Ukrainian crisis is to redress the situation that emerged after the 'illegal' sacking of President Yanukovich. Russia also justified its involvement in Ukraine by bringing up the imminent marginalization of ethnic Russians in Crimea (Friedman, 2014).

The Ukrainian government is also keen on maintaining closer ties with the EU. It claims that the Yanukovich government lost popularity over its refusal to sign the agreement that would lead to greater cooperation with Europe. Therefore, the mandate of the new government is based on the promise of closer economic integration with the EU (Higgins & Herszenhorn, 2014).

The Russian-backed separatists are unwavering in their aspiration to maintain their autonomy. They do not rule out the possibility of cooperation with Ukraine. However, they reject the idea that the region could be completely reintegrated into Ukraine (Sonne & Shishkin).

Many members of the EU are dependent on supply of gas from Russia. Therefore, while they wish to play an important role in the future of Ukrainian politics, they also want to prevent further escalation that might result in Russia cutting off its supply of gas to these European countries. Similarly, Russian economy is far from completely stable. It is, therefore, in Russian interest also to avoid further sanctions (Roxburgh, 2014).

Russia is wary of increasing western influence in its neighborhood. Russian leadership considers the EU attempts to integrate Ukraine with Europe as a strategy to weaken Russian control of the region. Legacy of the Cold War remains prominent in the minds of policymakers on either side of the divide (Taylor, 2015).

### **Application of Conflict Resolution Models to the Ukrainian Conflict**

#### **MACBE Model: A System Approach**

This model of conflict resolution proposes that conflict results from pathology in one or more of five (5) subsystems that are represented by their initials in the term MACBE: motive (M), affect (A), cognition (C), behavior (B) and environment (E). Motive involves seeing the conflict as purely winning or losing. Affect refers to feeling of hostility towards the other party. Cognition is geared towards distrust on each other. Behavior refers to the characteristic rigidity and a complete rejection of the position of the other. The social environment of the parties supports hostility towards each other (Pruitt & Olczak, 1995). Mild conflicts emerge as a result of pathology in one of the five systems. However, in case of heavily escalated conflict, all or most of the systems are influenced by the conflict. The model asserts that condition of circular causality exists in heavily escalated conflicts: Each element of the conflict reinforces the others.

The MACBE model is useful in measuring the severity of conflict by determining the components influenced by conflict. It also enables us to deconstruct conflict into its various components for greater and better understanding.

The model recommends that in heavy escalated conflicts all these dimensions are to be attacked for therapeutic action at once. The model recommends seven broad modules which can be applied to resolve heavily escalated conflicts. It also suggests the sequence in which these modules work best: Ripeness → Trust building → Analysis of the dynamics of the conflict → Negotiation → Changing social environment → Reducing Aspirations → Problem-solving training. However, the sequence can be altered to suit the conflict at hand. Moreover, it is not necessary to apply all the modules in every case.

#### **Application of MACBE Model to Ukrainian Conflict**

It is evident from the contrasting objectives of the two parties that the parties perceive the conflict primarily in winning and losing terms (Motive). Russia has been acting on the belief that it has a moral responsibility towards protecting the rights of ethnic Russians in

eastern Ukraine. The Russian-backed separatists see Ukrainian government to be responsible for the killing of civilians in the eastern part of the country. They are, therefore, persistently guarding their new-earned autonomy from Kiev. On the other hand, Ukrainian government and its western partners have time and again expressed their determination to protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

The heightening degree of hostility and the redrawing of loyalties are discernable on both sides (Affect). The feelings of hostility and estrangement are growing. *The New York Times* quoted a half-Russian Ukrainian candidate for Ukrainian parliament saying, "The Russian part of me died on March 1 when I saw the Russian senate allowed Putin to send troops into Ukraine" (MacFarquhar, 2014). For two countries that separated just quarter of a century ago, such sentiment is significant parting of ways.

Moreover, the two parties have been blaming each other for going back on promises and failing to meet agreed conditions (Cognition). The September 2014 truce could not result in a complete ceasefire, with either side blaming the other for violating the truce. NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen expressed such feelings of distrust towards Russia, "After what we have seen in Ukraine, no one can trust Russia's so-called guarantees on other countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity" (AFP, 2014).

Although, the engagement is generally characterized by rigidity, the two parties have conducted two rounds of negotiations at the highest level (Behavior). Therefore, we can insinuate that the parties are open to at least heed the position of the opposite side.

As I mentioned earlier, the emotions of the larger populations on either side have been severely affected by the conflict. Due to popular pressure, taking uncompromising positions in the conflict is politically an easier decision for the leaders to make than making compromises (Social Environment).

In view of the analysis grounded in MACBE model, it becomes sufficiently clear that the crisis involves pathologies in almost all the subsystem. Therefore, we can classify the conflict as heavily escalated. Our recommendations for resolving the conflict should, therefore, be commensurate with the high level of escalation.

### **Destructive Escalation (Conflict Spiral Model)**

Destructive escalation model discusses the various patterns in which conflicts escalate. Conflicts escalation is often accompanied by changes within each party and in the interaction between the parties. New parties get involved in the conflict making it more complicated. In general, in heavily escalated conflicts, the parties take irreconcilable positions; they resort to heavy tactics such as power play and threats; violence intensifies. The goals of parties change from maximizing their own gains to inflicting hurt on the other (Maiese, 2003).

The **Conflict Spiral Model** explains destructive as a 'vicious cycle of action and reaction' (Maiese, 2003). Each party's defensive reaction to the actions of the other party is more severe than the former's initial action; subsequently, prompting greater reaction. In this manner, the parties add to the set of grievances that each party holds against the other, making the positions increasingly irreconcilable.

In *retaliatory spirals*, a party desires to punish the other for the perceived hurt and harm it has been caused. The greater reaction from either party each time makes the conflict grow in intensity with heavy tactics used on both sides. The *defensive spiral* is 'driven by fear' (Maiese, 2003). Each party reacts to the danger from the other party by taking steps that are seen by the former as aggressive. Along these lines, the conflict spirals towards destructive escalation.

### **Ukrainian Conflict as Destructive Escalation (Conflict Spiral)**

The Ukrainian conflict started as a political dispute among the different Ukrainian political factions over signing the agreement for closer cooperation with the EU. The dispute escalated from parliamentary split to violent overthrow of President Yanukovich to a civil war with significant international power politics dimensions. The escalation spiraled as each party reacted to the other's actions by taking heavier tactics. Initially, pro-Russian President Yanukovich's administration used force against the demonstrators. However, it was the opposition that ousted Yanukovich by resorting to even heavier tactics. Russian government believed that it could subdue the uprising in Kiev through punitive action in the form of cutting economic aid and by supporting separatists

in eastern Ukraine. The conflict spiraled further when the new Ukrainian government chose recourse to the use of force against the separatists in the belief that the superior military power of Ukraine will be able to quell the separatists. The conflict escalated further when Russia got its own forces involved into the conflict. Despite the successive failure of the use of violent force, parties continue to resort to heavier tactics and thereby escalating the conflict further.

Initially, the Ukrainian opposition parties against Yanukovich correctly portrayed themselves as victims. Violence against unarmed protestors in Kiev enabled them to brand Yanukovich government as aggressor and the actions Ukrainian opposition as defensive. However, in the later days of the conflict, the number of individuals killed in the Ukrainian army action greatly surpassed the numbers killed in the Yanukovich government action against the protestors. The situation thus strengthened the position of separatists as apparent victims.

Similarly, over the course of the conflict the set of grievances also continue to grow. Both parties blame each other for the growing number of casualties. Either side claims to have endured more losses to the alleged aggression of the other side. Calls for revenge have been echoed across the divide. For instance, Ukrainian President Poroshenko swore to take revenge against the separatists after they shot down a Ukrainian military helicopter killing 12 soldiers (Saul, 2014). The separatists, on the other hand, claim victimhood alleging the Ukrainian government for death and destruction in eastern Ukraine.

### **Recommendations for Ukrainian Government to De-escalate and Resolve the Conflict**

1. The first step towards resolution of the conflict is to break the vicious spiral of retaliatory action. The best approach to achieve this end is to reach a workable ceasefire. As both parties primarily define their grievances in terms of costs to human lives, the ceasefire would at the least prevent creation of more grievances and thereby further escalation.
2. Both parties have expressed the realization that the conflict is increasingly costly both in terms of the loss of human lives as well as economic and infrastructural damages. Both parties have



- expressed their willingness to negotiate (Ripeness). Their mutual willingness is manifested by the negotiations in September 2014 and February 2015.
3. Both sides have expressed reservations about the seriousness of the other party (Trust). In order to build greater trust, the Ukrainian government, on its part, should abide by the provisions of the agreements of September 2014 and February 2015. It can also validate the motivation of the other party by demanding close observance of these agreements. One such demand can be to ask the separatists leaders to stop making statements about the status of area under their control as independence state.
  4. There is a need for a fresh analysis of the dynamics of the conflict. Ukrainian government should base its future position in negotiations considering the following facts about the conflict:
    - A) Ethnic Russians constitute majority of population in Crimea. There is a strong possibility that ethnic Russians support Russian position in the conflict, especially after measures taken in Kiev that would be perceived by these ethnic Russians as contrary to their interests – temporary stripping off of Russian as one of the official languages in Ukraine.
    - B) Ukraine's European partners are to a degree dependent on Russia for the supply of gas. Ukraine can, therefore, ill-afford to depend excessively on the EU as the EU would not want to jeopardize the supply of gas to its members. Moreover, EU is not a political monolith. Political changes in the major EU member states might result in dwindling support towards Ukraine. Elections in Greece have already brought a government in power that is not as hostile towards Russia as the previous government. The upcoming elections in the UK might further change the situation.
    - C) The imbalance of power between Russia and Ukraine is too great. Ukraine is financially indebted to Russia. Moreover, it is an undeniable reality Russia is a major power in the region. It is in the long-term interest of Ukraine to mend fences with Russia without making deals that will be detrimental to Ukrainian interest.
  5. In order to create an environment that is more conducive to de-escalation and resolution of the conflict, Ukrainian leadership need to shift the national narrative regarding the conflict. Currently, the environment is that of 'us versus them'. The government needs to tone down its statements towards Russia and the separatists. A good starting point will be to invoke the memory of the historical relations between Russia and Ukraine. Similarly, Ukrainian government should insist that the separatists move away from the aggressor-defender dichotomy in their narrative.
  6. Fresh analysis of the conflict and reformed social environment will allow the Ukrainian government to reduce aspirations among public before they engage in a meaningful negotiation process. While territorial integrity should remain the primary focus of Ukrainian negotiators, they should be open to the possibility of according greater autonomy to the areas under separatists control. Crimea represents an especially challenging situation. Ukrainian government should take a gradual approach to reintegration of Crimea. For instance, according Crimea a special status within the union can be a starting point. Moreover, it should also officially sympathize with the victims of violence in eastern Ukraine to mollify the sense of victimhood and otherness.
  7. The conflict can only be resolved through negotiation and mediation. Ukraine should make sure that its European partners seek guarantees from Russia against future intervention in Ukraine. Mediation by EU will also solidify Ukraine's long-term partnership with the EU.
  8. The analysis suggested in the study aim at the macro level. However, as it has been hinted in the report, there is also a need to engage at the micro level for long-term resolution of the conflict. Otherwise, the changes made through the process will remain reversible. I will suggest conflict resolution training workshops at the secondary leadership level as the way to impact micro level.

### Evaluation Framework

The effects of the intervention can best be determined through 'impact evaluation'. The positive and intended outcomes against which the success of the

intervention should be measured are cessation of violence between parties, closer Ukrainian ties with the EU with minimum damage to its relations with Russia and complete reintegration of the separatist controlled regions into Ukraine. The more quantitative measurement of the evaluation framework for the intervention includes complete end to violence after the adoption of first two recommendatory steps; resumption of diplomatic

relations with Russia at the adoption of third to fifth recommendations; and reintegration of Ukrainian territories after all steps are completed.

Achievement of the above outcomes is subject to a degree of consistency in the current dynamics of conflict. Though most predictable future scenarios have been accounted for in the study, the numerous variables involved make it hard to predict the course of conflict with complete accuracy.

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