Crimea Security Crisis

On March 11, 2014, the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center co-sponsored a teach-in along with the Program in Arms Control, Disarmament, and Security Studies (ACDIS), and the European Union Center. The focus of this teach-in was the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and the Crimea. The teach-in was comprised of six panelists: Edward Kolodziej (ACDIS and Global Studies), Carol Leff (Professor, Political Science), Kyle Estes (Ph.D. Candidate, Political Science), John Vasquez (Political Science), Lesley Wexler (School of Law), and Paul Diehl (Political Science). Each member of the panel gave a brief presentation, and then audience members were given the opportunity to ask questions.

Professor Leff began by providing context and background on the situation in the Crimea. Crimea is very important to Russia, as it is the location of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and serves as Russia’s link to the Mediterranean. Crimea is also home to a population that is predominantly Russian. Historically, Crimea was not officially a part of Ukraine until 1954, when Nikita Khrushchev transferred it to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Professor Leff also spoke concerning the referendum for the Crimea to leave Ukraine and once again become a part of Russia, and issues of the legitimacy of the referendum. On March 16, the referendum passed, with an overwhelming majority voting to rejoin Russia.

Kyle Estes discussed Russian and Ukrainian media coverage of the crisis. Both Russian and Ukrainian media sources utilize similar rhetoric, accusing the opposing side of fascism and illegal political maneuvers. Ukrainian media often characterizes Russia as being highly aggressive and violating Ukrainian sovereignty. Russian media has characterized the Russian involvement in the Crimea as a necessity in order to protect ethnic Russians. Mr. Estes postulated that the intense press rhetoric might eventually backfire upon the Russians.

John Vasquez was next to present, and he approached the crisis in Crimea from a global viewpoint. According to Professor Vasquez, Kosovo set a precedent for the violation of sovereignty in order to protect interests. Russia has taken advantage of that precedent in becoming politically and militarily involved in Crimea. If the situation in the Crimea devolves into an armed conflict, Professor Vasquez offered the opinion that the West would not become militarily involved. However, he did stress that he believed that a civil war in Ukraine was very possible, due to the divisions within Ukrainian society.

Lesley Wexler offered a legal assessment of the situation. The United Nations governs and regulates international armed conflict. Technically, the Russian presence in the Crimea is lawful (according to the current agreement concerning the Black Sea Fleet, Russia may have up to 25,000 troops stationed in the Crimea). International law also limits a possible Ukrainian military response, as the response must be necessary and proportionate.

Paul Diehl proposed four different outcomes for Crimea. Firstly, a reversion to the status quo; secondly, Crimea becomes an independent state; thirdly, Crimea joins Russia; and fourthly, Crimea becomes a quasi-state under the protection of Russia.

As we now know, Crimea has left Ukraine and
joined Russia. The global community has rejected this as illegitimate and does not recognize Crimea as a territory of Russia. As of the writing of this article, the situation has yet to devolve into international armed conflict, yet tensions remain extremely high. Russian forces have taken the Ukrainian Navy headquarters in Sevastopol, and several soldiers on both sides have died. The Ukrainian interim Prime Minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, has authorized Ukrainian soldiers in the Crimea to use their weapons to defend themselves, but the government has decided to pull all remaining Ukrainian troops out of the Crimea. Although Ukraine seems to have conceded Crimea to Russia, both nations appear to be prepping for the possibility of armed conflict.

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