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THE WEAK SPOTS OF THE ISIS

The ISIS, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, is definitely a rising force in the Middle Eastern landscape or, rather, in the political and social chaos presently prevailing in the region. It has reached its highest peak in terms of popularity thanks to the well-publicized brutality of its executions of foreigners and enemies, its ruthless use of the media and its military gains on the ground.

If, until now, everything has gone relatively smooth for Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's militias, the scaling up of the military interventions of the United States and its allies in Iraq and Syria will have long term negative effects on the extremists. A quick note on this: aerial strikes, missiles from warships and drones will definitely diminish the military threat, but unless someone regains the territories currently held by the ISIS, the war will never be completely won.

Until today we have no idea of who will step up to this task: the Iraqi army or the Kurdish Peshmerga, an international or pan-arabic coalition, or the secular rebel groups waging their fight against Bashar al Assad? And the US forces? This is unlikely to happen during the presidency of Barak Obama, both because his Administration has been actively involved in putting an end to George W. Bush's military adventures, and because the deployment of the American army involves lengthy and costly preparations and is at high risk of human casualties.

If we look at the military side of the equation, there are serious doubts over whether Al Baghdadi's movement will be capable of maintaining, consolidating or expanding the territories under its control. The saying "the more enemies, the more honor" is certainly fascinating, but definitely constitutes an obstacle to the aspirations of the movement. There are too many fronts open for a militia that, according to a recent CIA assessment, can count on between 20 to 32 thousand fighters, in addition to the mass of sympathizers whose reliability is directly proportional to the military successes of the ISIS.

The start of the allied bombings has forced the terrorist groups to shift its strategies and military tactics. No more big deployments of combatants to conquer a target, difficulties in the command and control system to dispatch orders, issues with logistical supplies. All of these aspects will influence the operations of the Islamist militias in the medium and long term, but not in the short one.

But besides from the impact of the international military intervention against the ISIS, there are also a number of other weaknesses undermining the terrorist group's tenure.

A strange alliance

The ISIS aims to create a State and in particular, because of its religious background, a caliphate. To do so, they need to shift from the military control over a territory, to its management through the creation of adequate 'institutions'. But the latter cannot be constituted overnight: there is a lack of qualified personnel in the various sectors that form a 'public' administration, and there is the need for such institutions to be accepted by the local population, that is traditionally not inclined to accept theocratic experiments.

As a matter of fact, there is a strange alliance behind the rise of the ISIS, an unholy partnership between Al Baghdadi's radical Sunni Islamists and Saddam Hussein's former pretorians, whose Baathist Arab background has traditionally lead them to crush all Islamic upheavals. What brings them together is a common enemy, identified in the Shiite government in Baghdad. The ISIS's military might is such only if compared to similar Shia paramilitary forces: Moqtada al Sadr's "Peace Battalions" or pre-existing voluntary militias (Jaish al Mahdi, The Al Badr Brigades, Asa'ib Ahl al Haq).

The former Saddamists form the professional military backbone of the ISIS. And they are certainly not supportive of the new set of rules the ISIS has imposed over the territories under its control. The day will come when the aims of these two groups will diverge. And this will only happen when and if the Sunnis regain an adequate political and social role in Iraq.

There is a slight hope when it comes to the new Iraqi government. Now that Nouri al Maliki has been replaced by Haider al Abadi, it is to be hoped that the new executive will enact a far more accommodating policy towards the Sunnis, just like Ayad Allawi did a decade ago. If this were to happen, automatically the Sunnis would revert from supporting the stances of the ISIS. One of the psychological weapons the Islamic State is currently employing is the sectarianism of the Shia government in Baghdad.

A rift between fundamentalists

Another potentially weak element is the existing rift between Sunni extremist groups operating in the region. The decision by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi to proclaim a caliphate was taken without priorly consulting or obtaining the green light from Al Qaeda and Ayman al Zawahiri. Despite the group's waning strength, 'The Base' is still a source of inspiration for several extremist formations.

The relationship between the ISIS and Al Qaeda has evolved. Osama bin Laden's former organization initially supported the foundation by al Baghdadi of the Jabhat al Nusra in Syria. But when the ISIS decided to annex al Nusra in April 2013, the two groups and their respective leaders clashed. The Syrians, lead by Abu Mohammed al Julani, refused being

absorbed and reaffirmed their allegiance to Al Qaeda. An infighting broke out that led to Jabhat al Nusra being expelled from the Syrian provinces controlled by the ISIS.

It is now a fact that the ISIS and Al Qaeda are in competition over the leadership of the Islamic terrorist galaxy. Al Qaeda has an international approach, they long for a clash of religions and civilizations. The ISIS, instead, is more pragmatic and focused on the territories under its rule and on regional affairs. Both organizations fuel hatred, exceed in their brutality and ask of sympathizers to emulate them. It is emblematic that during the recent terrorist attacks in Paris, the Kouachi brothers professed their allegiance to the Yemeni branch of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, while Amedy Coulibaly claimed he was a member of the ISIS.

The regional game

The survival of the movement is also deeply tied to what happens in the region and how the different actors will behave: Iran in its defense of the Shia, the Kurds wherever they are and even Saudi Arabia, under the threat of a Sunni revolutionary contagion. The first symptom struck Riyadh at the border with Iraq on January 5, 2015 in the area of Arar, where Saudi General Odeh al Balawi, commander of the northern border, was killed in an ambush. And this is the paradox of the ISIS. Although they share a radical view of Islam with the Saudi Wahabis, Al Baghdadi's men represent a threat to the stability of several monarchies in the Gulf. In fact, the ISIS is currently more engaged in fighting the apostates – term including not only the Shia, but also those Sunnis not sharing their radical ideology – and not the infidels, a favorite target of Al Qaeda.

The point is, the ISIS, despite being a Sunni armed group, is often being opposed by those same Sunni regimes that were supposed to support it. Those who do provide support to the ISIS, although not officially, like Qatar, do so for personal political gains. Doha is Saudi Arabia's staunchest competitor in the region, waging a proxy war against the house of Saud via the ISIS, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, the Islamic government in Misrata and Tripoli, the Houthis in Yemen.

Under this respect, the ISIS could be drawn into a conflict very different from the one it is fighting in. If this were to happen, the group would stop being a leader, but become a mere follower. And the support it presently benefits from could wane if found not to be convenient anymore. Just like the former Saddamists fighting alongside its terrorists, Qatar and the other groups that support the ISIS will continue to do so until they think they can pursue their agenda.

The reign of terror

The brutality of the ISIS is another one of its weaknesses. Beastly behaviors are useful to terrorize the population, occupy the mass media and depopulate the areas under their rule, thus facilitating their control. But, at the same time, they undermine the potential support base of those people who would be glad to favor a Sunni resurgence in Iraq and

see the fall of the oppressive monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula with favor, but who don't share the methods proposed by the ISIS.

Al Baghdadi's extremists forbid the use of the internet, mobile phones, have imposed obligatory conscription, the latter a sign that volunteers longing to join the ranks of the militias are presently lacking. The punishment for those contravening these rules is usually death. The ruthlessness against the enemies is a sign of weakness, that scares ordinary people away. The quality of life in Mosul and surroundings has also recently gone down following allied aerial raids that have impacted the supply of basic foodstuffs.

The ISIS security and intelligence apparatus is currently more dedicated to eliminating internal opposition and to controlling the population, rather than contrasting the enemy, as usually happens during a war.

A struggle within the Sunnis

The ISIS today is waging its war not only against the West or the Shia, but also against a portion of Sunni Islam. The success of Al Baghdadi's project depends on the outcome of this struggle.

Ruling over new territories has negatively affected the survival of the ISIS. All of the lands under their control were majority Sunni inhabited. There are a number of questions on whether the ISIS could ever think of stretching its control over Kurdish or Shia areas. And the same goes for the Sunni territories it now rules: there is a growing clash with the tribal groups that don't answer to Al Baghdadi's directives. Entire tribes have been exterminated in the zones conquered by the ISIS. But the tribal ties are at the basis of several Arab communities in the region. Its in their blood, it implies a close connection to the territories, it postulates that any offense will have to be compensated eye for an eye. The Jordanian reaction to the killing of its pilot set on fire by the ISIS is emblematic of this specific way of looking at things.

From the financial point of view, it has been widely reported how the ISIS has been capable of profiting from the sale of oil. This form of financing is now reducing. The allied bombings have hit several oil fields, there is no one capable of repairing them and even the tanker trucks have become a target. This has led the ISIS to concentrate its revenues on taxes, extortions against traders or truck drivers, kidnappings. In the long term, such a behavior could undermine the support of the people to their cause.

WHERE IS TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY HEADING TO?

After the end of World War II, Turkey developed a foreign policy aimed at obtaining a prestigious international role. It joined NATO, became an ally of the West and aimed at becoming part of the European Union. This approach was the political legacy of Kemal Ataturk and of the secularism he had imposed over the country. The military, that inherited such a tradition, continued along this path, whose direct consequence was the indifference towards the Islamic world surrounding Turkey. A psychological element was also at stake: after having lost the Ottoman Empire, regarding as peers countries that had once been vassals was both humiliating and remindful of a forever lost glorious past.

The advent of Erdogan

Turkey had become a regional power between Asia and Europe, standard bearer of the West and friend of Israel until Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his “moderate-conservative” AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi or Justice and Development Party) appeared on the political scene. Since 2002 and until today, Erdogan's rise to power has lead him to the post of President of the Republic in August 2014. The support his party has gained has eroded the influence of the military and currently allows the AKP to control two thirds of Parliament.

Over these years, Turkey's foreign policy has slowly, but inexorably shifted. The Islamic extraction of the AKP fatally pushed its leader into developing a preferential relationship with the Arabic and Muslim world that had been previously ignored. The European Union favored this process by not being welcoming towards a Muslim Turkey and for hardly tolerating the undemocratic behaviors Erdogan has showed during his political ascension.

This is why the Turkish President has shifted his attentions and has given birth to what some analysts define as a “Neo-Ottoman” policy towards regional neighbors that is based, where possible, on the legacy left by the recent imperial past. The preference, for obvious political reasons, went to those Muslim countries ruled by Islamic elites. After all the AKP has very close ties to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

The Arab Autumn

From this point of view, the Arab Spring was a great opportunity for Erdogan's Turkey. Each revolution against a secular regime was followed, most of the times, by the growth of Islamic movements. This was the case in Tunisia, Egypt, could have been so in Libya (although Ankara opposed the military intervention to depose Khadafi), and hopefully would have happened in a short time span in Syria, while it had already taken place with Hamas in Palestine.

Unfortunately for Turkey, events took a different twist. In Cairo, where Erdogan had established close ties with President Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brothers were removed from power and the military elite lead by General Abdel Fattah al Sisi regained control. The restoration immediately lead to a cooling down of bilateral ties.

President Erdogan had also become very close to Rashid Ghannouchi's Ennadha party in Tunisia. But the latter was recently defeated in the elections, where nationalists and secular parties prevailed over the Islamic ones. In Libya, it is the government and Parliament based in Tobruk that has received international recognition and not the Islamic factions in Tripoli and Misrata supported by Ankara. Hamas in Gaza is still marginalized in the event of a negotiation of Palestinian issues, while it has suffered a recent military setback.

Syrian checkmate

What has hit Erdogan's Arab-Muslim foreign policy the hardest is the failure to depose the Alawite regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria. The Turkish President is in the uncomfortable position of hosting on its territory the rebel groups opposed to Damascus, the flow of terrorists and weapons and, as shown by recent terrorist attacks, of imported terrorism. The spill overs of the Syrian crisis have put Turkey into a corner and in search of an adequate political response that still hasn't been found.

Recep Erdogan's political Islamism, a vision shared with other Middle Eastern actors, could become the first casualty of a drift towards fundamentalism. There are three thousand supporters of the ISIS in Turkey and, according to data from local authorities, about a thousand Turkish fighters scattered across Syria and Iraq. On the background are one million Syrian refugees stationing on Turkish soil. Such a scenario poses several security headaches, for one the border between Turkey and Syria is 900 km long and it is thus virtually impossible to completely oversee it.

The resurgence of the Kurdish issue, highlighted by the initial Turkish refusal to provide assistance to those besieged in Kobane, has created more problems. From a domestic viewpoint, it is dramatic that Ankara was eventually 'forced' to allow the transit into Iraqi Kurdistan of 150 Peshmerga fighters. The circumstance has led to the end of the negationist taboo over the existence of the Kurdish people living both inside and outside Turkey's national boundaries. This historic event will sooner or later have to be dealt with by Turkish authorities.

Nonetheless, currently President Erdogan continues to refuse assisting the Kurds. Neither against Assad's regime, a common enemy, nor in the fight against the ISIS, a potential threat to its national security. A derisive destiny has inflicted on the Turks the humiliation of watching Kobane being freed by the Kurds thanks to the aerial supply of American weapons.

Tensions with Washington and Tel Aviv

The relationship with the United States also requires some mending, following the Turkish refusal to concede the use of the Incirlik airbase for the raids on the ISIS. The military objectives of the entire operation are disputed: Recep Erdogan would want the international coalition to focus on Syria, while the United States is rather looking at Iraq.

The ties with Israel have also suffered a number of setbacks following the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador in September 2011 as a result of the Israeli special forces' attack on the Mavi Marmara, a Turkish ship part of the Freedom Flotilla bound for Gaza. Eight Turkish citizens perished in the incident. The affair is still unsolved despite Israel's official excuses. Turkey has two more requests to make: the payment of a compensation to the families of the victims and an end to the embargo and siege over the Gaza Strip.

Under scrutiny by Tel Aviv are also Erdogan's close ties with Hamas leaders Ismail Haniyeh and Khaled Meshal, both welcomed in Ankara several times. Israel accuses Turkey of having authorized Hamas to operate a command on its territory tasked with recruitment and overseas operations. At the same time, Egypt has also added Hamas's military wing to the black list of terrorist organizations.

New friends

The difficulties in the relationship with Israel and the United States have been compensated, in Erdogan's perspective, by a rapprochement with Vladimir Putin's Russia. The Russian President's recent visit in Ankara has opened a number of economic opportunities: gas-ducts from Russia on Turkish soil; a nuclear plant with Russian assistance, technology and financing; a favorable tax regime etc.. In fact, Turkey did not join the choir of nations imposing international sanctions on Moscow following the developments in Ukraine. Recep Erdogan seems to have accepted Putin's request for neutrality and non-alignment with American policies.

The reconciliation with Moscow implies a series of contraindications. Firstly, the issue of Crimea's Tartars, historically and linguistically tied to Turkey, facing increasing discrimination following the recent annexation of the peninsula by Russia. The Armenians are also a major black mark: their genocide has always been denied by the Turks and is still lacking a political solution. In April 2014 the border between Turkey and Armenia was opened and, on the eve of the ceremonies, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu pronounced official excuses. But the road towards a normalization of the ties with Armenia, that recently joined the Eurasian Economic Union, has yet to overcome 100 years of distrust and misunderstandings.

The recent appointment of the former minister of foreign affair Davutoglu to the post of Prime Minister is possibly a signal that something has to change in Turkey's relationship with the outside world. It is a fact that Turkey's foreign policy is currently both contradictory and facing a constantly evolving regional and international landscape. The AKP's Islamic prism is to a great extent responsible of how responses to events are being formulated.

Dangerous games

Turkey aims, together with others, at the leadership of the Sunni galaxy. This why its dealings with Tehran are often lopsided. On one side the Turks need Iran's energy supplies, on the other they are on opposite sides of the barrier when it comes to Syria and to Turkey's aspiration to lead Sunnism against Shiism. The affinity between Erdogan and the Emir of Qatar, hosted in Ankara on December 19, 2014, raises serious doubts over

Turkey's stance both in respect to several Sunni-lead regimes in the region and towards the Islamist militias menacing the area's stability.

To this effect, an emblematic affair has recently involved three trucks operated by the MIT ("Milli Istihbarat Teskilati" alias "Organization for National Intelligence") stopped by Turkish police at a checkpoint and found loaded with missiles, mortars and ammunitions. According to the Central Command of the Gendarmerie, the weapons were bound for Al Qaeda and/or ISIS militias in Syria. The episode dates back to January 2014, but it was disclosed only a year later.

Erdogan's government initially blocked, through an injunction, the publication of any news on the incident, claimed the load was humanitarian aid for the Syrian Turkmen and eventually attempted to cover up the affair by removing the Prosecutor that investigated the case and by accusing 13 soldiers of espionage. Despite these attempts, the scandal has erupted and the details of the operation have been unveiled. A foreign airplane had landed at the airport in Ankara and had unloaded the weapons on a number of trucks that drove to the Syrian border at Reyhanli. From there on, and according to a consolidated practice, the civilian drivers were substituted by men from the Secret Services that rode the trucks across the border.

Six containers, around 60 missiles, mortars and around fifty cases labelled in cyrillic containing mortar and Dushka anti-aircraft ammunitions. And we don't know who they were for. But there is a high risk they ended up in the wrong hands.

IS THERE NO END TO UKRAINE'S CRISIS?

1. The present situation

The crisis in Ukraine (a de facto armed conflict) started on November 21, 2013, and went through several truces, the last of which in December of 2014. This latest truce could be the prelude, hopefully, of a “cease fire”; all the while, in the Russian Federation (the main source of support and financing for the pro-Russia separatists in eastern Ukraine) there is rising discontent among the common folk, small bourgeoisie, “intelligentsia” and even on the part of a few oligarchs who had previously acclaimed the operation to “salvage Crimea and the Ukraine republics” that had proclaimed their independence in view of the creation of the State of Donbass in Eastern Ukraine.

These feelings are partially sparked by the plunging of the ruble, since the summer of 2014, on the main international financial markets.

The reasons for the fall of the ruble are the consequence, for the Russian Federation, of the “sanctions” put into being by the European Union and by the United States, coupled with the steep decrease of the price of oil on the markets of the OPEC and non-OPEC countries.

Such circumstance sparked calls to a “Second Cold War” between the superpowers, whose strategic potential is no longer measured by the number of nuclear warheads and vectors (missiles and strategic bombers) they own, but rather by the countries' availability of energetic resources (gas, petrol) and their respective markets.

Before tackling the crisis which, as the article's title suggests, seems like a never ending one, we must refer to the following:

- the criteria adopted by the Russian president Vladimir Putin with regards to former soviet satellite countries that the Russian Federation still considers to be areas of interest;
- the events that have brought about the present situation in Ukraine.

The foreign policy of the Russian Federation with regards to the former soviet satellite countries is inspired by the line of president Putin, who fails to come to terms with the fact that the United States leapfrogged Russia on a global level after the end of the cold war and dreams of a rebirth of the former Soviet Union.

Putin has inherited a scarcely competitive economic system due to a technological gap which still needs to be filled (exception made for the military industry, which is still competitive, especially in the missile sector). As he waits, Putin bases his strategy on energy resources, which he maneuvers personally with shrewdness and promptness, especially the gas destined to the European countries: 140 billion cubic meters which, presently travel the length of the “North Stream” (55 billion cubic meters) and the “Yamal” (35 billion cubic meters) gasducts.

The remaining gas travels across Ukraine, thus impacting on the following aspects of the present crisis:

- the anticipated payment of the gas coming from Russia;
- the possibility for Ukraine to reroute the gas destined to Europe to its own network;
- Ukraine's ownership of the ducts that cross their territory and the payment of royalties by Russia to use such ducts;

Putin's strategy is that of antagonizing the United States, preventing Russian areas of influence and interest (pro-Russian and Russian-speaking, that is) from approaching the West. When this happens, Russia reacts on each and every point, as they have done in the past against the US "Strategic Defense Initiative" and against the European Union with the founding of the EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union), with the precise intent to count Ukraine among its members (Ukraine has a growing pro-Russian and Russian-speaking population going from West to East; especially in Crimea and in Donbass; the latter being called Novorossiia (new Russia), thus unveiling Russia's "imperial" aspirations). Also, Putin is determined to keep control over Russia's areas of interest "at all costs" - see Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia in Georgia; Transnistria in the Republic of Moldavia and Muslim Azerbaijan - to the detriment of the Christian-Orthodox Armenia.

The situation in Ukraine is very complex and its comprehension could be eased by understanding the following:

- the dimension of the crisis spreads through time, going from local to regional and, in some ways, global;
- the "bid up" game played by Putin is often based on the alternation of provocations/threats (especially military) with gestures of appeasement, with the intent to bring Ukraine back under Russia's sphere of influence and thus recover the status of "superpower" that was lost at the end of the cold war.

2. What causes the present situation:

a. The Ukrainian crisis is commonly understood to have been sparked by the decision of the then-pro-Russia-president Viktor Janukovich who, on November 21, 2013, failed to sign the "Free Trade Agreements" with the European Union. Instead, Janukovich decided to sign an agreement with Russia, which offered a more profitable deal to lure Ukraine into the Eurasian Economic Union wanted by president Putin (the EAEU came into force in January 2015, its members are the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Belarus and other former soviet countries, if need be). The deal with Russia signed by Janukovich in 2013 was met with disappointment by the pro-European part of the population, who decided to occupy "Maidan square" to express their dissent and, much like in the "Arab Springs", then

moved on to the occupation of the presidential palace, causing the ousting and subsequent flight of president Janukovich.

On February 2014 Janukovich left Kiev, finding refuge in the more hospitable and Russian-speaking eastern Ukrainian region, near the border with Russia.

b. The event that formalized the passage from a local juxtaposition (in Ukraine, that is) to a regional one is the decision by the Russian parliament (March 1, 2014) to authorize president Putin in the use of force to defend Russian national interests; the “justification” for granting the authorization was the protection of Russian-speaking minorities, especially in Crimea and in Donetsk and Lugansk, as was the case with Georgia in 2004 (Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia) and in Moldavia (Transnistria).

On March 16, 2014, after the occupation of the Crimean institutions and military bases by pro-Russia separatists supported by Russian soldiers in the guise of volunteers (lacking military insignia), Crimea ('donated' to Ukraine in 1954 by Krushov - First Secretary of the Soviet Central Committee) was made to vote annexation by the Russian Federation.

The now so-called “Crimean model” was then extended to the oriental Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk (also called Donbass), which:

- have declared their independence from Kiev;
- have changed their name and status to “self-proclaimed Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk” in view of the formation of the State of Donbass, also called “Novorossiia” in Putin's imperial lexicon;
- have asked for the assistance of Russia: an appeal which caused 40-50 thousand Russian soldiers to be amassed along the Russian-Ukrainian border in the guise of a drill.

The “Crimean model” is aimed at finally breaking up Ukraine, with Russia controlling the Crimea-Donbass area and, if the opportunity arises, western Ukraine as well, in an attempt to “federalize” the entire country.

Although at a late stage, the West (EU, USA) reacted against Putin's provocations in several ways:

- on the economical-financial level with 2nd phase sanctions (against the “oligarchs” with close ties to the Russian administration; the 1st phase, which has less specific targets, was enacted after the annexation of Crimea;
- on the military level, partly because of the pressing requests for support by Ukraine to the EU countries that are geographically close to the Russian Federation; such military reaction consisted in the reinforcement of the aerial control over Baltic countries and Poland (about 15 airplanes) and of their ground borders (troops on foot): all of this as a

premise to the more specific dispositions to be adopted during a subsequent NATO summit.

c. At this point, the Ukrainian crisis had reached its “global configuration”, the start of which was marked by the “historical” China-Russia gas deal, signed in Beijing on May 21, 2014. The agreement bound Russia, starting in 2018 and for 30 years, to provide 38 billion cubic meters of gas per year to China: not an extraordinary amount, considering that a country such as Italy burns 80 billion cubic meters of gas every year. However, it is important to note that:

- this contract allows Russia to become the first “shareholder” of China, thus leapfrogging Europe;
- it could lead to negative side effects for western European countries, especially in terms of a reduction in gas procurement and a hike in gas prices.

The political elections in Ukraine on May 25, 2014, saw the victory, in the first round of voting, of Petro Poroshenko (55% of votes), an oligarch called the “king of chocolate” who was designated president of the Republic ad interim (the same post abandoned by Yanukovich last February) and confirmed Prime Minister Arsenij Jatseniuk, who already held his post ad interim.

Poroshenko showed up at the ceremony of assignment carrying the “scepter of the Cossack” (a symbol of power for more than 500 years) and, during his speech, stated the following:

- “Crimea belongs to us and will be returned to Ukraine”;
- “There will be no federal-style solution to the crisis”;
- “Ukraine will speed up integration with the European Union”;
- “The pro-Russia rebels will have to accept an unconditional surrender”.

Poroshenko's declaration of intent was not only appreciated by the pro-Europeans, but by nationalists and right-wing extremists of the western regions as well; on November 21, 2013, the latter groups presided Maidan square and chanted their slogan: “neither with the EU, nor with Moscow”.

Another significant circumstance occurred on June 28 of the same year, when Ukraine, Georgia and Moldavia signed the Free Trade Agreement with the European Union; the very same agreement that had triggered the crisis and caused the ousting of Yanukovich.

This latest circumstance, as one can imagine, enraged Putin. Then, on July 17, Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, was shot down with 298 passengers on board (no survivors); the airplane crashed over eastern Ukraine, next to the border with Russia.

According to official sources, whose version was staunchly supported by the new government in Kiev, the plane would have been shot down by a ground-to-air “Buk” missile of Russian make (NATO code SA-11), launched by pro-Russia militiamen in the hope of blocking supplies destined to the troops in Kiev.

Thus began the “hunt” for those responsible!

Washington accused the pro-Russia separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine for the accident and Russia for their logistical and operative support to the rebels;

according to Moscow, on the other hand, the accident was the work of a Ukrainian jet-fighter, who mistook the Malaysian airliner for a military 'refueling' flight for the separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the West considered applying the third phase of sanctions against Russia. Putin countered on August 21 with a halt to food imports from European countries as part of the self-sufficiency-based offensive against the sanctions imposed by the USA and EU (with the production, on Russian territory, of the products that were previously imported from Europe).

At that point, the invasion of eastern Ukraine was nearing.

On August 22, a line of vehicles carrying “humanitarian aid” from the Russian Federation destined to the populations of the self-proclaimed eastern Ukrainian Republics – the convoy had been stopped for days on the border to undergo controls by the Red Cross – entered Ukraine without receiving the go ahead; this caused outrage among the international community: it was a violation of the Ukrainian territory and the convoy seemed to carry arms and ammunition for the separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Later that month there arose once again the hope of bringing peace to Ukraine with the Minsk summit organized by the “Trilateral contact group on Ukraine”. The group's aim was to reach a truce in the rebel provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk as a prelude to a more wide-spread cease fire: the conflict had already caused 3000 victims!

During one of the group's meeting, there was a long meeting and a handshake between Putin and Poroshenko, which raised hopes of a pacification. On August 25, however, in a dramatic turn of events, Putin confirmed his strategy of alternating appeasement with military threats.

Suddenly, members of the 31st Russian airborne division were captured by the armed forces of Kiev just a few kilometers from Donetsk. Meanwhile, further south, a large convoy (Russian military vehicles without insignia – as usual) of invading troops were spotted. At that point, it was clear that Russia wanted to open a new front along the coast of the Azov sea, on the border between Crimea and Russia: The Minsk summit and the trilateral group had proved to be an utter failure.

Seeing its eastern regions encircled by pro-Russia militias with the evident support of the Russians, the Ukrainian government had no choice but to ask for the “help and support” of the Atlantic Alliance, NATO, in view of the group's November 4-5 summit in Wales.

The NATO summit brought about the constitution of a “Rapid Reaction Force”; the force was comprised of 4000-5000 troops (terrestrial, maritime and aerial units) to be deployed in a 2-5 day time-span. The troops were stationed in Poland and five bases/deposits were created; one in each of the three Baltic countries and the remaining two in Poland and Romania. NATO Surveillance of the Baltic sea was also reinforced.

To complete the picture:

On the internal level, the political elections of October 26, 2014, participated by the Ukrainian population with the exception of Donbass (where the war was still raging), resulted in a modest victory for the two parties led by President Poroshenko (“Solidarity Block”) and by Prime Minister Jatseniuk (“Popular Front”); each party won roughly 20%

Even when added up, the result did not reach an absolute majority, forcing the two to use a third party, that of the mayor of Kiev - that had obtained 13% of the preferences - in order to stay in office.

Meanwhile, the pro-Russia separatists held their own elections on November 2, which resulted in the victory of the pro-Russia parties. The Donbass elections were, of course, met favorably by Russia, while the Russian foreign minister Lavrov refused to recognize the October 26 result, stating that Kiev's elections were rigged.

Meanwhile, in eastern Ukraine the war kept killing as Putin's strategy was further implemented in the aim of bringing Ukraine under Russian influence once again. Putin even attempted to divide the European countries, as demonstrated by the nine million euro grant given to the Front National of Marie Le Pen (“operation ATM for the European nationalists) and the financial support granted to other right-wing formations in Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, Netherlands, etc. All of these political parties opposed globalization, the United States, immigration and the European currency Euro.

3. Recent events

On a separate note are the events of December 2014 and January 2015:

After the negative result of the US mid-term elections, Obama closed the year 2014 by opening new diplomatic talks with Cuba and hoping to do the same with Iran and Russia before the end of his mandate.

As for Putin, during a message to the nation on occasion of the new year, he expressed his hope that relations with Washington could now be carried out on an equal basis: the

message was interpreted as a request to lighten sanctions (by the USA and EU) against Moscow in exchange for an end to Russian support for separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Although the US Secretary of State John Kerry was already on the job, Obama did not rule out the possibility of using the old Henry Kissinger (91 years of age) in negotiations.

In this context one should keep in mind the difficult economic situation of the Russian Federation.

Russia's economy is centered on energy resources (petrol and gas); it is thus greatly influenced by the sanctions imposed by the West and by the decrease in the price of petrol, which went last summer from 110 US dollars per barrel to just 50 dollars (since January the cost has dropped further) because of the introduction into the market of US petrol obtained through 'fracking' (oil extracted from schist rock with a new, US devised, technological procedure not exempt from critique by environmentalists).

To attempt to salvage the price of oil, OPEC countries met in November 2014 to ask Saudi Arabia to cut down production, but were met with a refusal. The investment bank "Goldman Sachs" esteemed that 2015 will see oil selling for 50,4 US dollars per barrel which, when coupled with the price for transportation, means roughly 55 US dollars per barrel.

On the European front, the Russian Federation has suspended the "South Stream" project on December 1, 2014, because of Bulgaria's refusal to let the pipeline across its territory (one can imagine the dire consequences of such suspension for SAIPEM, the company controlled by Italian state energy giant ENI and for those working on the project – which was supposed to raise 2,4 billion US dollars). Regarding the countries on the path of the "South Stream" pipeline, the CEO of Gazprom Alexei Miller announced the construction of a new pipeline which will go from Russia (in the same compression station of the "South Stream" in Russkaya), through Turkey to the Greek city of Kipoi; from there, it will cross the Adriatic sea (Otranto channel) and reach the city of Santa Foca di Lecce, Italy.

The new pipeline – which is meant to carry 63 billion cubic meters of gas, 14 of which for Italy – will tap the "Shah Denitz" oil fields in Azerbaijan. Italy burns roughly 73,2 billion cubic meters of gas per year and produces only 8,4 billion cubic meters; it therefore imports roughly 64,8 billion cubic meters which are currently provided by the following nations:

Algeria (Transmed): 20,6;
Russia (Trans Austria Gas): 19;
Netherlands and Norway (Transitgas): 9;
Libya (Greenstream): 6,5;
Others (including Qatar): 10.

The suspension of the “South Stream” project was not met with particular worries on the part of Italian authorities because of the announcement by Gazprom that an alternative is at hand and because Algeria has expressed its availability to increase their share of Italy's gas imports.

4. Conclusions

The Ukrainian crisis seems to have slipped out of the hands of its main actors:

Obama wants to put Putin back in his place, since Russia has taken up too much room in the US international files as of late (Egypt, Syria, even the Snowden affair);

Putin, who was taken by surprise when 'his' man Janukovich fled Kiev, has tried to put a patch by closing Russia's grip on Crimea and fueling the conflict in eastern Ukraine. As we mentioned earlier, Putin is enraged by Russia's secondary role in global politics and would like to regain the role of superpower, even through military aggression.

In addition to the Ukrainian situation, talks should soon be underway for the status of Transnistria, the separatist region of Moldavia which Russia wants to annex: Russia has deployed a contingent of 1200-1500 troops in Transnistria (the “Operative Group of Russian Forces in Moldavia”); a small contingent that could be just the spearhead for a larger deployment to put pressure on the western border of Ukraine.

Finally, the internal situation in Ukraine is quickly worsening. The political forces of the ultra-nationalist right-wing (Svoboda party and Praviy Sektor) tend to keep away from the two fighting factions (neither with the EU nor with Russia). They do not forget the role that they played in Maidan square and in the ousting of Yanukovich.

Regarding possible developments of the Ukrainian crisis which “hides” within it the confrontation between Brussels and Washington on one side and Moscow on the other, we must also consider the following:

a. the agreement between Ukraine and the EU, which Kiev had refused on November 21, 2013, only to sign it with a new government on June 27, 2014, is aimed at allowing Kiev to break free from Moscow's grip and spearheads European interests right into the heart of Russia's sphere of influence.

Strategically speaking the agreement for the inclusion of Ukraine in the Atlantic Alliance is political hypocrisy, since their admission was originally stopped by Germany (and France and Italy) during the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008.

Kiev has turned into the “battlefield” of someone else's war, where the interests of other nations meet and clash; just like what happened during the cold war, with its “proxy” wars. This has induced observers to speak of a “new” cold war. True, some of the elements of the Ukrainian crisis are similar, but the international political landscape has mutated radically since then; the world is no longer bi-polar and weighed on the nuclear terror's balance.

Meanwhile another player has emerged with its usual low profile: China, which, apart from its gas procurement agreement with Russia, has the means and ambition to grab and “englobe” additional land in the Ukrainian Republic.

b. The fact that the Ukrainian conflict has become chronic is bad for everyone, even for the third parties involved that wish to hop on the bandwagon. Ukraine is in the wrong place at the wrong time: it is condemned by its geography to be within Russia's gravity pull. The West has done little apart from its sanctions, while Putin continues in his game of threatening then appeasing. His goal remains that of making Ukraine into a federation under Russian control.

c. Finally, to answer the question posed in the title (Ukraine... is there no end to the crisis?). The crisis is destined to last, unless the following concessions are made:

- the end of the sanctions that are detrimental to Russia and others;
- an end to the West's policy of approaching the areas where Russia holds strategic interests.