The IGS Global Scholar's Prize 2014

In the Shadow of MH17

Winning Essay

by Samuel Garrett
Historians will look back on the tragic destruction of MH17 as a moment that changed the global geopolitical landscape. Since the Cold War, the West has scrambled for more influence in an increasingly globalised economy, and the states of the former Soviet Union have looked for ways to improve their financial situation (Mancini 2014). MH17 drove a wedge between them the moment it exploded in the skies over Ukraine. Years of hope and good intentions now lie scattered like debris and it will take time to pick up the pieces, and international relations have taken on a whole different dynamic as a result.

Like the attack on Pearl Harbour, the fall of the Berlin Wall, or even the attacks of 9/11, the most significant impact of the MH17 disaster was not the event itself but the galvanising effect it had on world leaders, and the global rethink in international relations that it caused. MH17 means much more than whether Eastern Ukraine re-joins Russia. It holds implications that extend far beyond the battlefields in which it now lies, and it is these shockwaves that traversed the world that are changing the way the world’s powers interact.

This essay will look beyond the confines of the Ukrainian conflict and the human tragedy of MH17. It will examine the event’s impact within Russia, the way it relates to the US and the rest of the world, and what it means for relations within Europe and the future of the EU. It will show how highly publicised events like this expose and widen underlying tensions between nations.

The speed and severity of the accusations of direct Russian involvement in the immediate reaction to the tragedy demonstrates the extent to which Russia’s relations...
more closely with the West. Journalist Yulia Latynina of the Novaya Gazeta, a leading Russian opposition paper, has said that as a result of the Ukrainian crisis, “The gap between Russia and the civilised world will become deeper” (Latynina 2014). Despite being a minority in Russia, the opposition has deep pockets (BBC News 2014), and as the economic impacts of international sanctions are felt, they will gain traction. In future, they may prove to be a serious political threat to Putin.

Tensions are also beginning to divide the West. The US and its EU allies are pushing for more sanctions (Bremmer 2014). However, the EU has a vested interest in not overly damaging the Russian economy because they rely on Russia as a major trading partner and so cannot afford the sanctions to be too severe. Russia provides one-third of Europe’s gas – 50% of it piped through Ukraine (BBC News 2014). France has been critical of Putin’s actions throughout the Ukrainian crisis, and yet is completing a multi-billion euro deal, supplying warships to the very regime that they have denounced. The UK’s priority on the other hand, being less dependent on Russia than the other major European economies, is to maintain its alliance with the US (Holton 2014).

These conflicting national interests risk further splitting an already divided EU at a time when the UK is already rethinking its membership (Helm 2014). The European Union is becoming stuck in the middle of a 60-year standoff between the US and Russia that threatens to tear it apart. The tensions have been brewing under the surface for 25 years, and it is only in the aftermath of MH17 that the extent of the deterioration in relations has become clear.

It is too early to predict where all of these competing tensions will lead, but it is certain that the ramifications of MH17 will be felt for many years. It has had massive global ramifications, and whatever happens, it has changed the world’s geopolitical landscape whether it is in the West’s favour or not.

As Francesco Mancini, senior advisor to the International Peace Institute writes (Mancini 2014), “the main risks to peace and prosperity lie in the uncontained spill over of crises, one region to another, as MH17 has tragically reminded us”.

Comprehensive bibliography supplied with essay on IGS website’s Portal: www.igssyd.nsw.edu.au
Bibliography


