

Report

Turmoil in Ukraine

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People wave Russian flags as they protest in the southern Ukrainian city of Sevastopol, the base of the Russian Black Sea fleet. [AFP]

Abstract

This report explains the current crisis in Ukraine by looking at Russia's strategic aims in invading and annexing Crimea. The political, strategic, historical and cultural significance of Crimea are explored in order to explain Russia's actions in Ukraine. The report also takes a look at the European security implications of Russia's behaviour in Ukraine.

Understanding Russia's Actions in Crimea

Russia's actions in Crimea are motivated by an external and internal calculus. The Kremlin considers that in order to reclaim its status as a global power it must first dominate what it calls the 'near abroad' which comprises the states that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 ⁽¹⁾. In terms of political symbolism Ukraine is important as it was its independence from the USSR that brought the latter's extinction as a political actor in the international system.

Russian foreign policy has tried in the past decade to bring back into its sphere of influence Kiev with limited success. In 2004 Kremlin tried to coerce Ukraine to accept a Moscow friendly successor to Leonid Kuchma, however the rigged election of Viktor Yanukovich triggered the Orange Revolution that forced a repeat of the ballot and the election of the western oriented Viktor Yushchenko. In 2013 as Ukraine was preparing to sign an association and free trade agreement with the European Union, Russia used a series of strong arm tactics and inducements to discourage Kiev to foster closer relations

with Brussels. Although Ukraine caved in November 2013 to Russian pressure and abandoned its plans to sign the DCFTA with the EU, Moscow's aggressive tactics resulted in the largest protests since the 2004 Orange Revolution, and eventually forced President Viktor Yanukovich out of office.

Losing Ukraine to the West is not an option for Russia if it wants to consolidate its former sphere of influence in the 'near abroad' and reclaim the status of great power. Ukraine is critical as it offers strategic depth to Russian territory and acts as a buffer to western influence. Sevastopol is the main base for the Black Sea fleet and the Crimean Peninsula is uniquely situated to allow effective Russian power projection in the Black Sea region as well as in the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, Ukraine is the linchpin of the pipeline network that brings Russian gas to Western Europe. Although Russia has tried to bypass Ukraine by building the Nord Stream pipeline and promoting the South Stream project, most of the Russian natural gas still reaches European markets through the Ukrainian network of pipelines. Securing control over the gas pipeline network of Ukraine is a vital Russian interest.

In the past decade, Ukraine has witnessed mass street protests against Russian intervention in its internal politics and the increasingly authoritarian policies of Leonid Kuchma and later Viktor Yanukovich. Russia has viewed the mass protests in Ukraine (as well as in other parts of the former Soviet space) as a threat to its political regime. In fact, the fear of a 'colour revolution' overturning Vladimir Putin's regime has been the main driving force behind the policies to curtail the activities of the Russian oppositions and to insulate Russia from western influences. The protest movements that twice brought about political change in Ukraine (in 2004 and in 2014 respectively) have been labeled by Russia as western sponsored peaceful regime changes (2) . Consequently, the recent political developments in Ukraine pose a threat to Russia's own peculiar political regime and therefore military intervention was required in order to protect it.

Culturally, Ukraine is important for Russia as it was on this territory that the first Russian state was founded by the Rurikid Dynasty in the ninth century (3) . Both Russia and Ukraine claim now the historical and cultural legacy of the Kievan Rus. Crimea, which now lies at the center of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, is the birthplace of Russian spirituality as Prince Vladimir, the ruler of the Kievan Rus, was baptized by Orthodox missionaries in the town of Chersonesus on the Black Sea, thus making possible the conversion to Christianity of all of those living under his rule (4) . Furthermore, around 60 percent of the population of Crimea is ethnic Russian (5) and looks toward Moscow for protection and support. The protection of the rights of the large

Russian speaking population living in Crimea offered the perfect pretext for the current invasion.

Limited Use of Force

The Russian Federation has employed limited, yet effective and decisive military force in Crimea. The use of force was deliberate and although it seemed sudden and unexpected at first glance it was carefully planned and carried out. Using the forces already based in Crimea, backed up by local militias and reinforcements from Russia, the Russian military has taken control of the Crimean Peninsula without bloodshed. The Ukrainian forces stationed in Crimea have been isolated and besieged within their barracks. The Ukrainian Navy has been blockaded in its main base on the peninsula after the Russian Navy has sunk two decommissioned ships just outside the Novoozerne harbour (6) . Russian forces have taken control of Crimea's critical infrastructure without opposition and replaced Ukrainian authorities with local bodies, loyal to Moscow.

Russia's limited use of force against Ukrainian forces stationed in Crimea hints that Moscow's aims are limited and tries as much as it can to avoid escalating the conflict. Brutally taking on Ukraine's armed forces would not have allowed Russia to control the escalation of the conflict and would have brought upon Moscow further international condemnation. The forces which took control of Crimea's critical infrastructure and administrative buildings did not wear any national distinguishing markings, although their identity was never in doubt, in order to limit the political fallout of its actions and avoid as much as possible being labeled as the aggressor (7) .

Although nobody was fooled by Russia's tactics and Kremlin has been universally condemned as an aggressor in Crimea, the limited use of force and its rather velvet glove approach to subduing the Ukrainian military units present in the region shows that the Kremlin wants to control the escalation of the crisis as much as possible. Whenever the Russian military was confronted by a firm Ukrainian response the former chose not to press further. On March 15 the Russian helicopters try to land troops near the village of Strilkove, in the Kherson region, but retreated when confronted by aircraft belonging to the Ukrainian Air Force (8) . Russian personnel attempted on more than one occasion to convince the Ukrainian forces to switch sides and swear allegiance to the newly established Crimean authorities or join the Russian forces, but have been overwhelmingly confronted with a steadfast refuse (9) .

Russian Aims

Kremlin's immediate aim was to separate Crimea from the rest of Ukraine as fast as possible and with as little violence as possible in order to pave the way for its annexation to Russia. The referendum held on March 16 has made annexation to Russia inevitable.

Crimea's annexation to Russia is part of a longer term strategy which aims at undermining Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. By annexing Crimea, Russia encourages the eastern part of Ukraine, which is demographically dominated by ethnic Russians, to seek either independence or a special status within Ukraine. Ultimately Ukraine may end-up as a federal state, with the eastern part being closer to Russia and the western part gravitating towards NATO and the EU (10) . However, even if Ukraine becomes a loose federation there is no guarantee that Russia will respect this arrangement in the long term.

A secondary goal of Russia's actions in Crimea is to bring about the downfall of Arseniy Yatseniuk's government. Kremlin gambles that in the long run the new government in Kiev cannot survive the tearing up of its territory. Faced with the annexation of Crimea and calls for independence from the eastern part of Ukraine, the fragile government led by Arseniy Yatseniuk might collapse and will be replaced by a new cabinet, which would be more open to Russian demands and interests.

The Limits of Russian Revisionism

By invading and annexing Crimea Russia has questioned the status quo that emerged after end of the Cold War. Kremlin's actions run contrary to the Helsinki Final Act, the Russia-NATO Founding Act, the Budapest Memorandum, the Russia Ukraine Friendship Treaty, as well as the UN Charter. All of these documents condemn the use of force for settling international disputes between states, military aggression, territorial annexations and guarantee the integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine (11) .

Furthermore, the invasion and annexation of Crimea calls into question the extent to which Russia respects the independence and sovereignty of former Soviet republics. Previous Russian conduct towards the former Soviet republics suggests that the Kremlin never really came to terms with the dissolution of USSR and applies a different standard than the accepted international norm when it comes to respecting the territorial integrity and independence of these states. The frozen conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, show a dangerous pattern of Russian use of force to undermine and coerce the former Soviet republics.

The invasion and annexation of Crimea raises delicate questions about Russia's behaviour as a responsible member of the international society. Is this behaviour limited to Russia's 'near abroad' where it seeks to enforce its hegemony or is this merely the shape of things to come? Will the success of these aggressive policies towards the former Soviet republics embolden Russia to use them against other states?

This is a most serious challenge for the European post-war order which is characterized by peaceful cooperation and the settling of disputes by means of international law and diplomacy. Even if Russia's use of force is limited to its 'own sphere of influence' it represents a departure from European accepted norms of international behaviour. The last thing the European Union needs is an aggressive Russia near its borders. Any country, in close vicinity to Russia, which has a dispute with Moscow, may now be faced with the prospect of military conflict and intervention. The security of the Baltic States, Poland, Romania, Sweden and Finland is being called into question by Russia's actions in Crimea.

Russia's invasion and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula is part of a larger strategy to dominate and control its 'near abroad'. Kremlin's hegemony over the states of the former Soviet Union is seen as key to recovering Russia's status as a great power, on equal footing with the West. Furthermore, Ukraine links up Russia with the west through its network of gas pipelines while at the same time acts like a geopolitical buffer between Western Europe and the Kremlin. However, Russian international behaviour raises questions about its status as a responsible stake holder in the international system and threatens European security.

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Endnotes

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