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The Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014

a paper based on an address to the Institute on 25 March 2014 by

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Russia's opportunistic annexation of Crimea in March 2014 in the face of the West's impotence has weakened the West globally and has strengthened Russia commensurately. Ukraine, in future, would be foolish to adopt an anti-Russian stance. There are significant actual and potential costs for Russia and the overall balance is still uncertain, but it is clear that the West has reaped what it sowed.

Key words: Russia; Ukraine; Crimea; European Union; United States; ethnic Russians; Ukrainian nationalism; Sevastopol naval base.

The Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014 came as a shock to the international community and has been widely condemned for, among other things, illustrating Russia's expansionist foreign policy. It has also been seen as the product of a high priority long held aspiration on the part of Russian President Vladimir Putin to re-unite Crimea with the Russian motherland. I want to suggest that it was neither of these things, but an opportunistic act undertaken to achieve more strategic goals on the broader international stage. It was also an action that has involved significant potential costs for Putin. These costs are threefold:

1. This is the first reworking of post-Soviet boundaries since the collapse of the USSR,² and poses a precedent which, if acted upon, may not always be to Russia's benefit.
2. Putin has sought to create a Eurasian Union, building on the existing credit union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Such a Union needs Ukrainian participation for it to be credible, but seizing Crimea is unlikely to make the Ukrainian government positively disposed towards it.
3. A sharply deteriorated relationship with the West. Given that these costs were all predictable, why did Putin go ahead with the annexation of Crimea?

The Fate of the Ethnic Russians

In the lead-up to the annexation, spokespeople in Moscow made much of the threat faced by ethnic Russians in Crimea and, to a lesser extent, in the rest of Ukraine as well. However, there is no hard evidence that the ethnic Russian population anywhere in Ukraine

was at the time experiencing a direct or immediate threat. But events in Ukraine need to be seen in a broader context.

Since the collapse of the USSR, a common theme in Russian public life has been the need for Russia to protect the interests of the 25 million ethnic Russians who, with the disintegration of the country, found themselves outside the borders of Russia. This included Russians in Ukraine where they comprised about a fifth of the total population – they comprise close to 60 per cent in Crimea. Although in practice Moscow has done little to protect ethnic Russians in surrounding states, this has been a continuing theme rhetorically. This fitted nicely with the nationalism that Putin has sought to project since being elected president in 2000. He has made the reassertion of Russia as a "great power" (derzhava) one of the principal themes of his presidency, and he rests this on a civilizational argument: Russia is a great civilization with a long culture and tradition, and has a prominent place in the world. This, in his view, needed to be reasserted.

Within this context, claims about a danger to ethnic Russians following the fall of the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Yanukovich fell on receptive ears in Moscow. But what gave such claims greater potency was the declaration from within the new provisional Ukrainian government that Ukrainian should be the only language of business in Ukraine. This was seen to pose a direct threat to the language rights, and by implication civil rights, of the ethnic Russians, and increased concern in Moscow for the welfare of their compatriots.

But protection of ethnic Russians was not the key factor driving the annexation. Three aspects of geopolitics were more important: the Sevastopol naval base; the nature of Ukraine; and the issue of the West.

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²Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Sevastopol Naval Base

Crimea became Russian territory in 1783, and soon after a major naval base was established at Sevastopol. This was strategically important because it was the only warm water port enjoyed by Russia, and because it gave access to the Mediterranean. When Khrushchev formally shifted administrative responsibility for Crimea from Russia to Ukraine in 1954, it made no practical difference: the most important decisions continued to be made in Moscow, and the Soviet navy continued to use Sevastopol. However, when Ukraine gained its independence within the existing borders at the end of 1991, Russia lost control over Crimea but was able to negotiate continued use of the port facilities at Sevastopol. This arrangement was later formalized in a treaty granting Russian access to the port until 2042.

However, the new interim government in Kyiv (Kiev) talked openly about joining the European Union (EU) and NATO,³ thus raising the spectre of Russia's closest neighbour joining two organizations which were never going to admit Russia as a member. In terms of Sevastopol, this raised the prospect of the Ukrainians possibly seeking to re-negotiate Russian access to the port or, equally unpalatable, Russian ships having to share the facilities with NATO vessels. Given Russia's view of the West discussed below, this was unacceptable.

The Nature of Ukraine

Ukraine is a state but not a nation, in the sense that the diverse peoples living within Ukrainian borders do not share a single unified sense of identity. Essentially, the country can be divided into three broad bands running approximately north-south. The eastern part of the country is the more industrialised part. It is where the ethnic Russian presence is strongest, and politically it is the heartland of support for pro-Russian politicians like Yanukovich. The western part of the country was added to Ukraine after the Second World War and comprises people who formerly lived under Polish or Czechoslovak rule. The central band was the Ukrainian heartland. These three bands had different historical, linguistic, religious and cultural traditions, and the western part of the country was the homeland of the more hardline Ukrainian nationalism. Such national sentiment had historically had strong anti-Semitic and anti-Russian themes.

³The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Atlantic Alliance), founded in 1949, is a military alliance among most North American and Western European governments. It has been expanded since 1991 to include some central and eastern European states.

Historically there were strong links between the Ukrainian heartland and Russia. Kyiv was known as "the mother of Russian cities", because this was the first major Slavic urban centre and the point from which the settlement of Russia was undertaken. But over time, Kyiv was surpassed by Moscow, and as the Russian empire spread in the 17th century, much of Ukraine came under its control. It remained under Moscow's control until 1991 when Ukraine became independent; the first time (except for a brief period in 1917) it became an independent separate entity. Culturally, Ukraine and Russia were close, and certainly the general conception in Russia was that Ukrainians were their brothers. There was thus an image of fraternal unity which, for many Russians at least, was unfortunately broken when the USSR collapsed.

This cultural relationship was underpinned by strong economic relations. During the Soviet period, the Ukrainian economy was simply part of the integrated Soviet economy, which meant that the connections between Russia and Ukraine were both strong and deep. A strong relationship still exists, manifested most clearly in continuing Ukrainian reliance on Russian energy exports and financial subsidies. In defence terms too, the relationship was close, with both forming part of the Soviet military, and Ukraine constituting an important potential theatre in the event of conflict. From a purely Russian perspective, Ukraine could be seen to constitute an important buffer against potential foes from the West.



Ukraine before Russia's annexation of Crimea, showing its position in Eastern Europe [Map: Magellan Geographix]

The depth and extent of the relationship, including its very strong emotional aspect, means that any sensible Ukrainian government needs to be aware of Russian sensibilities and to act in knowledge of these. This is certainly how Moscow sees it. The problem was that the overthrow of the pro-Russian Yanukovich (Putin had strongly supported his election) government and its replacement by a new interim government brought to power a group among whose members were people not favourably disposed toward Moscow. The new interim government was a disparate group of those who had led the public protests on the Maidan (the central square in Kyiv) which had brought down Yanukovich. Among these were representatives of the extreme right from the western part of the country, who had mainly provided the force when violence broke out in the Maidan. Chief among these were two groups, Pravyi Sektor (Right Sector) and Svoboda (Freedom). Members of both groups were prominent in the new government.

The origin of the demonstrations in the Maidan was when Yanukovich withdrew from negotiations to bring about a closer relationship with the EU in favour of a renewed relationship with Russia. The Ukrainian withdrawal was widely attributed to pressure from Putin on Yanukovich, and undoubtedly the Russians made their views known. But there were other considerations that would have weighed on Yanukovich's mind: the EU association would mean short term economic pain without a guarantee of longer term gain, and the offer made by the EU effectively involved cutting Ukraine off from its traditional ties with Russia. The protesters wanted close association with the EU in the belief that this would ultimately bring economic improvement and a better standard of living than continuing with the Russian relationship. Upon claiming power, the new interim government initially said it wanted to retain close relations with Russia while also improving the relationship with the EU. However this position was soon superseded by statements that Ukraine wanted to move closer, and even join, the EU, while no mention was made of the Russian connection. It was at the same time that the comments about the Ukrainian language noted above were made.

This suggested to Russia the possible advent of an anti-Russian government in Kyiv, something which, given their shared past, would not be very palatable, particularly if Ukraine was permitted to enter the EU club from which Russia was excluded.

The West

The prospect of an anti-Russian government in Kyiv was also bound up with the attitude to the West. From Moscow, the West was seen as having played a significant part in the popular mobilization on the Maidan that overthrew the democratically elected (and most observers agreed that the election was basically fair) Yanukovich. Although in his public statements Putin often exaggerated the extent of Western

involvement, the perception that the West was involved had a solid basis. Russian politicians only had to look at the parade of United States and European politicians who went through the Maidan making speeches in support of the protesters and the continued statements of Western leaders and governments supporting the removal of Yanukovich to see evidence of Western involvement. This was reinforced by leaked conversations between Western officials that suggested their involvement in deciding the personnel of the new government. All of this seemed very reminiscent of the Ukrainian colour revolution of 2004 in which Yanukovich's then election victory was overturned as fraudulent as result of popular demonstrations, studies of which have shown significant external involvement. In addition, during February the EU conducted negotiations with both Yanukovich and the protest leaders which resulted in a compromise arrangement whereby the president would have remained in office until May when new elections would have been held. This promised a way out of the crisis, but when the protest leaders returned to the Maidan with this, the crowd rejected it. Instead of insisting, the EU went along with the jettisoning of the agreement and the radicalization of the protest. Rather than seeking a solution, the EU appeared to opt for the anti-Yanukovich, and anti-Russian, outcome.

The perceived Western commitment to an anti-Russian outcome in Ukraine was strengthened by the Western threats made against Russia should she annex Crimea or, after that, advance troops into eastern Ukraine. The view from Moscow seemed clear: the West was out to overthrow a legitimate government and install an anti-Russian administration in its place. This occurred against a background of more widespread suspicion of Western action.

The perception in Moscow was that the West, and in particular the United States, had since 1991 been engaged in a concerted policy to both humiliate Russia and restrict her capacity to build up her international power and position. This not only infringed Russian national interests, but ran directly counter to the path of projecting Russia as a great power that Putin had sought to follow. In support of this view, Russian leaders could point to a number of things:

1. The Russians believed that, in return for accepting the reunification of Germany, Gorbachev had been given an undertaking that the border of NATO would advance no further east than Germany. However within a few years, not only were former members of the Soviet alliance in Eastern Europe – Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania – members of both the EU and NATO, but so too were the former Soviet republics Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Instead of the NATO border ending in central Europe, it was within a few hundred kilometres of Russia's second city, St Petersburg. This was seen as a clear breach of faith.

2. In the period leading up to the 2008 war with Georgia and during the negotiations between Ukraine and the EU that culminated in Yanukovich's overthrow, there was much talk of both Georgia and Ukraine becoming members of the EU and NATO. This would have meant that two more former Soviet republics, including the second most important, would become members of organizations that Russia was not going to be allowed to join. It had been made clear to Russia that she would not be able to become a member of either body. Furthermore, from Moscow's perspective, there was no apparent reason for NATO to exist except to oppose Russia, a view supported by NATO's inability to come up with a clear rationale for its post-cold war existence. The West was thus seen to be seeking to induct these two states into an anti-Russian bloc.
3. The United States has sought to conduct a "democracy promotion" policy, seeking to consolidate what was seen as the victory of democracy in the cold war. From Moscow, this looks like a policy of induced regime change. Moreover, it seemed to be directed principally at traditional Soviet/Russian allies – Serbia, Iraq, Libya and Syria were all seen to have come under American military pressure. Other parts of the world (including the former Soviet Union) were subjected to pressure in the form of the direction of assistance to civil society organizations, which were interpreted in Moscow as being anti-regime agents. So democracy promotion looked to Moscow very like attempts at regime change.
4. The announcement of the United States withdrawal from the 1972 ABM Treaty,⁴ something that seemed to make sense to Moscow only if the Americans wanted no longer to be bound by it and therefore to build up their missile stocks.
5. The announced establishment of a missile early warning system in Poland. To Moscow, this seemed to be directed at Russia rather than Iran, as its supporters claimed.

These factors combined to create the impression that the West was intent on pursuing an anti-Russian agenda, and its actions over Ukraine were seen as part of that.

⁴The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union limited the number of anti-ballistic missile systems which each party could deploy to defend against missile-delivered nuclear weapons – each party was limited to two ABM complexes, each of 100 anti-ballistic missiles. The United States terminated the treaty in 2002.

Conclusion

Against this background, the annexation of Crimea can be seen to have been motivated by a couple of geopolitical objectives. First, the annexation, plus the troop manoeuvres on Ukraine's eastern border, should reinforce to the government in Kyiv that it would be very foolish to adopt an anti-Russian position. Russia retains the capacity both militarily and economically to inflict serious damage on Ukraine should it wish to do so, with the ease of the Crimean takeover graphically illustrating this.

Second, the Crimean annexation highlighted the way in which the West was impotent to do anything about it. Western posturing was shown to be largely hollow, and even though the United States sent a naval vessel to the Black Sea, increased flights along the borders of the Baltic states, and announced a series of economic sanctions, the practical effect of all of this has been limited. By portraying the West in this light, Russia has not only weakened the West's position globally by showing up its impotence, but has effectively bolstered Russia's own reputation in the eyes of those who are wary of the growth of any sense of unipolarity.

While the annexation of Crimea has had some costs, it has also had domestic benefits for Putin – it has been very popular and it does bring back part of the country that most Russians had been disappointed to lose – and it has had some foreign policy benefits. How the ledger ultimately works out remains to be seen, but one thing is clear: the West has reaped what it sowed. Had it not presented Yanukovich with a take it or leave it choice between a pro-Russian and an anti-Russian position and had it not been so blind in its support of the anti-Yanukovich protesters and the subsequent interim government, the situation may have been averted. But when the opportunity presented itself, Putin acted.

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