

THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

By Michael Cecire



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Events in Ukraine are moving fast. What at first appeared to be a token show of force in the Crimea¹ has rapidly evolved into what appears to be an ongoing Russian military intervention into Ukraine² -- which only days ago was the subject of optimism after its kleptocratic ex-president, Viktor Yanukovich, was driven from power by Ukrainian revolutionaries. Yanukovich's forced abdication may have been a positive development in isolation, and may still yet, but it also apparently set wheels into motion that appear to be in the throes of culmination: the Russian invasion of Ukraine's Crimea region.

If it were to happen anywhere, it was always going to start in the Crimea. The jutting Black Sea peninsula is the site of a major Russian naval base -- the anchorage for the venerable Russian Black Sea fleet and host to some 15,000 Russian military personnel. Most of its population are ethnic Russians, the most acute exception being its substantial, pro-Ukraine Tatar minority. Russia's initial moves appeared to include only its troops from the base and a mingling of pro-Russia Crimean militias -- technically in violation of its basing agreement with Ukraine, yes, but hardly a Red Dawn remake either. But then the situation rapidly escalated: aircraft from the nearby Russian province of Krasnodar Krai began to appear; Crimean airports and the surrounding airspace was closed; telecommunications and highways were blocked off. In essence, textbook prep work for an armed intervention.

Why the Crimea?

And an armed intervention did come. By February 28, it was already clear that the Russians were arriving in force. Armored columns were sighted, reports circulated of 2,000 Russian troops landing, and Russian military helicopters were arrayed throughout Crimean airspace. A day later, that number has been upped to 6,000 troops as the Russian government, ever the legally adroit, passed a bill justifying its invasion of Ukraine.³ Hopes that Russia will confine its aggression to the Crimea, which was part of Russia until it was transferred to Ukraine in 1954, look to be threatened by reports that similar patterns are being repeated elsewhere in east Ukraine -- Donetsk, Odessa, and Zaporozhye, among others.

Putin's rationale for a Crimea grab in many ways is counter-intuitive. By seizing the Crimea, Moscow has essentially guaranteed that western Ukraine, already predisposed towards the West, will recoil at the idea of any future Russian involvement in the country. Even without deploying its military forces, Russia already possessed a rich array of options for destabilizing Ukraine. Ukraine depends on Russia for energy, trade, and even the

¹ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/02/28/exclusive-russian-blackwater-takes-over-ukraine-airport.html>

² <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jc7PAEVi4b7R2mTduQAF7r8ssOAA?docId=a8f772b3-506a-44c8-9c99-68112b1f0037&hl=en>

³ <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/tensions-rise-in-armed-standoff-in-crimea-between-ukrainian-and-russian-backed-forces-337942.html>

occasional bailout. And as recent events have demonstrated, Russia has few qualms about using its influence among its local compatriots as levers to be exercised. Yet despite these considerable mechanisms, Moscow has chosen intervention.

Why? The likeliest explanation is fear, not strength. From the Peloponnesian War to the First World War, great powers have often gone to war more out of a fear of the future rather than the present. In Ukraine, the toppling of Yanukovich -- which Moscow blamed on the West rather than the bravery of Ukrainians themselves -- seemed to signal that the country would be moving back towards Europe. This was anathema to the Kremlin, which has long counted on Ukraine as an essential component, perhaps *the* essential component, to its Eurasianist integration project. If there were ever a time to gobble some Ukrainian real estate on the cheap, this was it. And the Crimea was the lowest hanging fruit.

In the Crimea was a largely pro-Russia population, a massive Russian military installation (any comparisons to Tartus in Syria are misplaced, the latter being little more than a pier by contrast), and only a tiny distance across the Strait of Kerch from Russia itself. It's defensible, with little more than a chokepoint connecting it to the Ukrainian mainland, and easily supplied by preexisting supply routes for the naval base. It was, in effect, the most logical place to make a move.

Precedents to Keep

But by no means should the world regard the Crimea as necessarily the frontier of Russian ambitions. Other pro-Russia areas of eastern Ukraine are reportedly also agitating for Russian reinforcements. There are even unconfirmed reports that Russian troops have already crossed into the mainland.⁴ If this is true, or becomes true, it will almost certainly demand the involvement of the Ukrainian armed forces, which could rapidly escalate into a full-blown conflagration between west and east Ukraine and Ukraine and Russia -- all with the potential for spillover. This is a possibility that is as deeply worrying as it appears increasingly plausible.

But even falling far short of a full-scale invasion, the Russian move into Crimea has some circuitous logic to it. On one hand, Russia's invasion signals a kind of Russian abdication. Kyiv, Moscow has decided, is lost. The western parts of the country are also lost. Western Ukraine has, for all intents and purposes, gone outside of its reach.

Russian President Vladimir Putin may not be able to keep a united Ukraine from continuing its Westward drift, but it can certainly cause enough trouble to make Western integration a much more difficult proposition. Just as it did in Moldova and in Georgia in the 1990s, Russia is establishing zones of contestation within Ukraine that it can use as leverage. Eastern Ukraine is that leverage. Neither NATO nor the European Union, Russia calculates, will not invite a country that is torn asunder, with wide swaths pledging allegiance to Russia (or some Moscow-appointed, minor local potentate).

It's too early to tell what Russia's ultimate designs are. Like it did with Transdnistr, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh, Russia may be content to allow the Crimea to remain an "official" part of Ukraine -- albeit one under strict Russian influence and in open defiance of the capital. Or it's possible that the Crimea may be "recognized" and become a de facto province of Russia. Or it may actually be absorbed within Russia, *de jure*. Similar questions surround other regions of eastern Ukraine, which are themselves in varying stages of rebellion from Kyiv.

Readying for War

Even as news of Russian marines being disengorged onto Ukrainian territory circulated, the new Kyiv government was surprisingly silent. One almost wonders if Kyiv's newly ruling opposition was being counseled to keep restrained in the hope that a diplomatic settlement could be found. Yulia Tymoshenko, last seen confined to a wheelchair in Kyiv's Maidan square, has reportedly found the energy to fly to Moscow for negotiations. It remains unclear, however, if she is going there to save her country or be the recipient of demands. Time will tell.

There are signs that the Ukrainian government is beginning to find its voice amid the crisis. Kyiv government leader

⁴ <http://tyzhden.ua/News/103674>

Vitaly Klitschko, the charismatic ex-heavyweight boxer, has called for a "national mobilization" to resist Russian aggression.⁵ And recent reports indicate that the Ukrainian military has been put on high combat alert,⁶ bringing the two big neighbors on the brink of what would surely be a ruinous war. On paper, Russia may have a considerably larger military, but a full-scale invasion of Ukraine would be an operation of a scale not seen since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan -- a capability that many analysts are skeptical Moscow could prosecute, let alone durably sustain. Ukraine, by contrast, has a smaller military but has home court advantage -- it would be conceivably committing the bulk of its forces to any engagement, which Russia will not.

Of course, war is not a foregone conclusion. There's a fair chance that the crisis will remain confined primarily to the autonomous Crimea region, which may look like the best of bad options to both Kyiv and most of the West. But even if that happens, Russia's brazen intervention has surely roused Europe and NATO to the ever-present danger of Russian revanchism. In 2008, the Russian invasion of Georgia was widely seen less as a violation of international law than a demonstration of Georgian intemperance. Indeed, all told, there is little about current crisis has much in common with the 2008 conflict. But the West will have little choice but to see the Russian military intervention of Ukraine as exactly what it is: an invasion.

The Baltic States, who are certainly thanking their lucky stars for having joined NATO in time, have already invoked Article IV of the NATO treaty, which obligates Alliance members to jointly confer.⁷ This is a serious step -- only one level removed from the collective defense clause of Article V -- and was only last used when a Turkish fighter was reportedly shot down over Syrian airspace in mid-2012. This does not indicate that the Alliance intends to rush to Ukraine's aid, but it certainly conveys the seriousness by which Alliance members see the unfolding situation in Ukraine.

Policy Options

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is not merely an unfortunate series of events in a faraway land, but a serious threat to European stability and, more broadly, the rules-based international order. Moscow's contravention of international norms by intervening in Crimea signals a belief that it can blatantly and unilaterally manipulate regional dynamics as it sees fit. Equally troubling is Russia's apparent flouting of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, to which it is party along with the U.S., the U.K, and Ukraine. The Memorandum guarantees Ukraine's territorial sovereignty in exchange for Kyiv's transfer of its nuclear arsenal to Russia. That Russia's Crimea intervention may have a deleterious effect on the global non-proliferation regime may be a major understatement. Russia's unsanctioned and illegal commitment of forces into Ukraine also threatens the very fabric of the Euro-Atlantic Security architecture, which is premised on the primacy of state sovereignty and NATO as the guarantor of that system. No, Ukraine is not a NATO member, but it is unquestionably a part of Europe.

Unfortunately, there are not many good options for dealing with Russia's latest act of aggression. It would take a major and as yet-unforeseen spiraling of events for there to be even the consideration of committing Western forces of any kind to the conflict. So far, the extent of a U.S. response appears to be cancelling President Obama's trip to the planned G8 summit in Sochi. Reportedly, Congress is in the process of discussing "targeted sanctions," and just about everyone can agree that Russia's membership in the G8 has been a frivolous allowance tolerated for far too long. Yet, as reported, these responses are unsatisfying and fail to correspond to the weight of Moscow's transgression. However, there are several meaningful, and substantial, steps that the U.S. and Europe ought to consider.

First, while it is currently unclear what "targeted sanctions" looks like, Western states should be prepared to give them some genuine bite. In-force Magnitsky List legislation already provides mechanisms for sanctioning Russian human rights violators. The List's current membership is embarrassingly small, but it could be rapidly expanded to include a much more representative cross-section of the Russian leadership. Europe, for its part, ought to adopt similar legislation on the national or trans-national level to give the List a necessary multiplying effect. Other, broader economic sanctions should also be considered and employed. That would be a start.

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sgqp21VG0uo&feature=youtu.be>

⁶ <http://www.voanews.com/content/ukraine-refuses-to-act-against-russian-provocation/1861937.html>

⁷ <http://euobserver.com/tickers/123321>

Second, as Admiral James Stavridis counsels, NATO should be put on high alert and be prepared to assist Kyiv with intelligence and logistics, particularly in the event of a full-scale Russian invasion into mainland Ukraine.⁸ As an added measure, NATO should also reinforce its regular Baltic Air Sovereignty mission with additional, frontline fighters such as the F-22 or Eurofighter Typhoon. This would at once reassure our Baltic allies while broadcasting Alliance resolve to defend its members.

Third, NATO should begin immediate preparations to bring Georgia into NATO.⁹ While involving Georgia may not at first appear to be an especially meaningful response to events in Ukraine, beginning the process of Georgian accession would send a clear message to Moscow that it cannot use its military forces as a de facto veto over its neighbors' foreign policy choices. Georgia is a strong friend to the West: it is among the largest contributors to the Afghanistan mission, its well-regarded forces have recently agreed to join the EU military mission in Central African Republic, and it has already begun integrating into NATO's rapid reaction force. By just about any measure, Georgia is ready to join the Atlantic alliance. It's past time to make that happen, particularly in light of Russia's aggressive moves in Ukraine.¹⁰

But perhaps above all, the most important Western takeaway from Moscow's actions in Ukraine is the simple realization that a new age in Russia relations is upon us -- and all that it implies. It will be extremely difficult, if not wholly impossible, for the U.S. or Europe to pretend that Russian relations are salvageable in the near term. Make no mistake, the West has been in competition with Russia for some time -- given tensions over Syria, push-pull in the Black and Caspian Seas, and energy blackmail in Europe, to name a few -- whether or not our governments were able to admit it. But as Ukraine so clearly demonstrates, Russian revanchism is not a hypothesis, but a challenge the West must acknowledge and address proactively.

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⁸ http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/01/nato_needs_to_move_now_on_crimea

⁹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/edward-p-joseph/after-ukraine-nato-must-g_b_4875263.html

¹⁰ <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/yes-nato-should-let-georgia-8906>