

RUSSIAN MILITARY BUILDUP IN CRIMEA & DESTABILIZATION OF THE BLACK SEA REGION

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I was asked to address the “increasing militarization” of Crimea by Russian Military forces and the resulting “security challenges for the Black Sea Region.” My brief comments are organized around 3 topics.

I. Military Invasion of Crimea

The occupation of Crimea was not an indigenous revolt but foreign invasion. This is not the place to go into a detailed chronology, but the sequence of events is telling:

- Summer 2013 – while negotiating future naval-base rights on Crimea, Russia pressured Ukraine not to move towards the EU but join their economic sphere – coercion that produced the pro-European “Maidan” protest which grew into a mass movement;
- 20-22 FEB 2014 – Russian advised security forces in Kiev killed 100 protestors with sniper fire resulting in the collapse of the regime and flight to Russia of President Yanukovich;
- 26 FEB 2014 -- Russian subversives and “fellow travelers” backed up “little green men” begin taking over Ukrainian government and military facilities in Crimea, followed by a suspect election and suppression, arrest and even assassination of opposition leaders;
- 28 FEB 2014 Russian fighter aircraft dominate the skies over Crimea, their warships bloc the Ukrainian Black Sea fleet, while waves of assault and transport helicopters initiate the military invasion followed by landings of major combatant units ferried across the Kersch Strait;
- April 2014 – Russian forces mass on Ukraine’s eastern border with Russian forces in Donbas initiating the major conflict there that continues to this day.

I arrived as an observer in late March and personally observed Russian tanks, mechanized infantry and heavy artillery on the causeway to Crimea. I also interviewed numerous Tartars some of who have been tortured, Ukrainian Marines who were brutally beaten by Russian occupiers even though they were not armed, and many of the leaders of the interim Ukrainian government, who albeit with misgivings, acceded to Western requests to let external negotiators persuade the Russians to take an “off-ramp” rather than actively resist in Crimea. .

What is the significance of the Military Invasion of Crimea?

- It is the first State territorial aggression in Europe since the end of World War II;
- It violates the UN Charter - Article 2 (4);
- It violates specific agreements the Russians have signed including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty; and Conventional-reduction of Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty;

- It is an egress violation of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances.

It was a personal honor to have participated in arms control efforts, including: Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty; and the Conventional-reduction of Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty ... so I bemoan their passing.

But the Budapest Memorandum, all too conveniently forgotten, is worth remembering, because it has onerous implications for the international system in the future. With the collapse of the Soviet Union Ukraine became an independent state with 1,272 strategic warheads and 2,500 theater / tactical nuclear weapons. The new Ukrainian Government did not want to be a nuclear power but was concerned that if they gave all of them up they could be bullied by their nuclear neighbor. As a result, Russia, Britain and the United States all declared that in exchange for Ukraine surrendering those nuclear weapons they would neither threaten their use nor impinge on Ukrainian territory or sovereignty. When confronted with blatant Russian violation the US and Britain were asked for help – but their response was tepid: “we promised not to threaten or invade you we didn’t say we would help defend you.” Ask yourself -- what future countries will remain in the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty in the face of such hollow security guarantees.

II. Russian Military Buildup in Crimea

Since January 2014, Russia has significantly increased its military forces in Crimea and backed them up with a major redeployment in the adjacent areas. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion but they are not entitled to their own facts. Due to the short time available for this summary I have prepared a series of maps and empirical data on force levels (based on extensive review of open-source material and commercial satellite coverage) for the this website for those who would find the details and specifics of value. For those who would dispute my facts – my response is simple, match it with your own detailed force and deployment data.

In Crimea, the size of Russian Military presence has grown significantly between 2014-2020 adding:

- 20,100 Military Troops: 12,400 to 32,500;
- 195 Main Battle Tanks: 0 to 195;
- 318 Armored Vehicles: 92 to 410;
- 259 Artillery: 24 to 283;
- 78 Combat Aircraft: 22 to 100.

In short, the introduction 850 major combatant systems, or a 6-fold increase.

But it is not just the presence of the forces but their activities – particularly field exercises and actual use of force – that should raise concern not only for the countries in the regions but for the International community. To mention only a few:

Kavkaz 2016 – exercise where amphibious and air assault offensives were staged from Crimea and included the deployment and firing of surface-to-surface nuclear capable missiles;

Zapad 2017 – a massive exercise covering all Russian forces from the North Cape to the Black Sea in a presumed war with NATO involving a practiced invasion of the Baltic region but it also included offensive participation by Crimean forces as well as the Russian led, trained and equipped Donbas units;

2020 Kavkaz exercise – large scale maneuvers opposite Ukraine and Black Sea, involving 5 armies, 3 air armies, and a dozen airborne, air-assault & Special Ops units, to rehearse “localization of armed conflict” with participation from Armenia and Russian occupied Georgia.

And this is not the end. Several weeks ago, Russia announced another massive anti-NATO exercise called Zapad 2021 to be held this coming summer.

The International Community should also be focused on indications and evidence of Russia reintroducing nuclear weapons into Crimea (austensibly withdrawn in the 1990s). There evidence of renewed activity at the Theodosa 13 nuclear storage site, reports of SS-26 Iskander surface-to-surface missiles appearing in Crimea for at least temporary deployment (similar to Russian actions in Kaliningrad in the Baltics over the last decade), deployment of strategic TU-22 bombers and dual capable strike aircraft using Crimean airfields and the potential arming of no less than 10 Russian Naval combatants equipped with dual-capable Kalibr missiles.

III. Russian Forces in Crimea and Instability in the Black Sea Region

The deployment and use of Russian forces in and around the Black Sea region is a serious threat to peace. It represents the continuing threat of full-scale invasion of Eastern Ukraine as well as destabilizing the delicate military balance in the Black Sea.

The war in Ukraine’s Donbas region cannot be separated from Crimea. It has already cost 13 thousand killed, 40,000 seriously injured and a one and a half million people displaced. Moreover, an offensive breakout there along the southern coast offers the high-payoff land link to Crimea. The presence of thousands of Russian troops and their command of nine mechanized brigades on Ukraine’s eastern territory combined with air-assault and amphibious forces on Crimea pose an omnipresent offensive threat. Further Russian use of force to impede Ukrainian access to the Sea of Azov and threats to expand the occupation of Crimea to the Kherson region of Ukraine under the guise of access to fresh water from the Dnepr River are “hot spots” that could produce a major conflagration.

But this threat is not limited to Ukraine. The continuing presence of Russian “peacekeeping” forces in Transnistria do not stability to Moldova. The increase in security of both Bulgaria and Romania have forced NATO to respond with at least symbolic forces to aid them. Russia’s large scale military presence in Syria make their relations with Turkey problematic, and recently exacerbated by the Azerbaijan-Armenian war.

CONCLUSION

Bottom-line: Where is the “off-ramp?”

The inability of the West to enforce the Minsk II agreement and the dialogue of the deaf in the Normandy Four holds little promise.

Against all odds and with minimal western military support Ukraine has not only held their own against Russian aggression but reformed and re-built their battle hardened Army, which than the last ten nations to be admitted to NATO ... combined. For seven years they have stood up to the bullying and direct attacks but without an effective Navy and an aging Air Force they cannot afford to modernize -- how long ... how long can sustain a competitive balance without external help?

Ukrainian membership in NATO would be a major boon to the western alliance in defensive capability and strategic position. As a forward glacis it could divert Russian military strength against Central & Northern Europe, provides a security screen for new NATO members on the southern flank. Unfortunately, some members of the alliance are inhibited because Ukraine has a territorial dispute – but that is hypocritical sophistry -- had that been the case during the Cold War, Germany would not have been a part of NATO and might still be divided today.

Given growing Russian hostility towards the US, there is accelerating momentum in Washington to make Ukraine a non-NATO strategic partner – with American air power operating out of Ukraine bases – which could re-balance an unstable posture in the Black Sea.

Nevertheless ... the best option would be for the International community to realize their stake in Ukraine’s security and forestalling a spiraling arms race in the Black Sea by a unified demand for settlement of the war in Donbas and return to the pre-annexation status quo ante in Crimea.