



THE BEAR IS BACK

THE CRIMEAN
CAMPAIGN
REPRESENTS A
DISRUPTIVE SHIFT
IN STRATEGY
FOR RUSSIA

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Russia's annexation of Crimea demonstrated to the world that the country is capable of using 21st century tactics at the operational level to achieve strategic level results.

Through a combination of conventional and unconventional warfare, Russia caught the West off guard and achieved a relatively bloodless strategic victory in Ukraine. These events have left many of the United States' European allies questioning the recent U.S. decision to refocus its overseas military priorities to the Asia-Pacific region, and have left Russia's neighbors greatly concerned about the future intentions of an empowered Russia. The West's response will largely depend upon opinions as to whether Crimea is an isolated event, a special circumstance unique to Ukraine, or the first demonstration of Russia's willingness and ability to successfully operate militarily and geopolitically in the 21st century.

BACKGROUND

In November 2013, then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich abandoned an agreement for closer ties with the European Union and instead announced that Ukraine would seek closer ties with Russia. This action sparked a series of intense protests that would eventually lead to the downfall of the Ukrainian government and, on February 22, 2014, the ouster of Yanukovich.¹

These developments were alarming to neighboring Russia, which has historically viewed Ukraine as solidly within its sphere of influence. According to Dmitry Trenin of the Carnegie Moscow Center, concerned that "Ukraine was suddenly turning into a country led by a coalition of pro-Western elites in Kiev and anti-Russian western Ukrainian nationalists," Russian President Vladimir Putin reacted by ordering the execution of a set of apparently preplanned operations that included the occupation of

People in Sevastopol, Crimea, watch a broadcast of Russian President Vladimir Putin's address to the Russian Federal Assembly on March 18, 2014, as he signed a treaty annexing the peninsula to Russia. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



Propaganda in Sevastopol in March 2014 urges voters to support a referendum to have Crimea join the Russian Federation. The poster reads, "On 16 March We Choose" and suggests the alternative to Russian rule is Nazi rule.

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the Crimean Peninsula.² Later, on March 18, in his address to Russian lawmakers concerning the annexation of Crimea, Putin detailed the fears that served as impetus for Russia's actions when he stated that the threat of "Ukraine soon joining NATO ... would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia."³

Putin decided to use military power in Crimea based largely on an accurate Russian intelligence assessment of Ukraine's woefully low level of military readiness.⁴ However, Russia's response to the Ukraine crisis differed substantially from its past foreign military interventions. Instead of using mass formations of large motorized divisions to overwhelm its adversary — the up-till-then standard Russian military response — it instead "used small numbers of well-trained and well-equipped special forces combined with an effective information campaign and cyber warfare," according to an April 2014 article in *The Moscow Times*.⁵

BATTLESPACE PREPARATION

It is now clear that while the world's attention was focused on the Sochi Olympics, elite units were being discreetly transferred to the Russian naval base in Sevastopol in preparation for operations in Crimea.

While the specific identities of the units involved and their deployment timelines are still being determined, it is widely speculated that, in addition to the 810th Separate Naval Infantry Brigade, stationed in Crimea with the Black Sea Fleet, elite Airborne Forces (VDV) and various Spetsnaz (special forces) units, along with a number of units from the Southern Military District, were involved in the Crimea operation.⁶

To divert the attention of Ukraine and the West, on February 26, a large-scale snap military exercise was launched in the Western Military District (MD) that borders eastern Ukraine.⁷ Russian officials said that the exercise, reportedly involving approximately 150,000 Russian military personnel, was not in response to the events in Ukraine and they assured the West that Moscow would not interfere in Ukraine.⁸ As would be clear in a matter of days, these statements were all diversionary tactics to deceive the West and prevent it from effectively responding.

Notably absent from this large-scale military exercise were any units from the Southern MD, which also borders Ukraine and is well-placed geographically to be the staging area for any operation in Crimea. In addition to its strategic location, the Southern MD, in part because the Sochi

Olympics had recently been held there, had the highest levels of military readiness in Russia. Despite this, it was “business as usual” in the Southern MD, according to open-source reports.⁹

It became apparent that while the West was focused on the military exercises being conducted in the Western MD, amid concern that these exercises could be the beginning of a large-scale Russian intervention in Ukraine, small highly skilled military units from the Southern MD were already operating in the Crimea.

THE OCCUPATION OF CRIMEA

On February 27, the day after military exercises started in the Western MD, reports surfaced that unidentified “masked men” had seized government buildings in Simferopol, Crimea’s capital.¹⁰ These men were armed with the latest military equipment, wore unmarked military uniforms and appeared to be highly trained and disciplined.¹¹ Dubbed “local self-defense forces” by the Russians, these units quickly fanned out over the Crimean Peninsula and seized government buildings and airfields, surrounded Ukrainian military bases and secured the key ground lines of communication between Crimea and the rest of Ukraine.¹²

With surprising speed and professionalism, the Crimean Peninsula was occupied in a matter of days without loss of life. By March 1, the Ukrainian military within Crimea had effectively been neutralized, with all Ukrainian bases either occupied or surrounded by the so-called local self-defense forces.¹³ Additionally, on March 5, the Russian military blocked the navigable channel into and out of the main Ukrainian naval base in Crimea by scuttling at least one Russian ship, effectively blockading the Ukrainian Navy.¹⁴ Throughout this period, the Ukrainian military was either unwilling or unable to respond to the rapidly developing situation and remained inside its barracks, offering no armed response to the occupation.

Crimea’s parliament voted on March 6 to join Russia (an action declared illegal by the Ukrainian government in Kiev). By March 18, Crimea had held a referendum on secession, the results of which reflected overwhelming support for secession, and had been annexed by Russia.¹⁵ On March 19, Ukraine began issuing orders to evacuate its military personnel and their families from Crimea, having lost all control of the peninsula.¹⁶

INFORMATION WARFARE

In addition to military maneuvering, Russia strongly leveraged information warfare to further destabilize Ukraine, strengthen pro-Russian feelings in Crimea and attempt to create a basis of legitimacy for its actions in both world and domestic opinion. Through the use of overt channels (secret services, diplomacy and

the media), Russia used multidirectional and complex measures to control the storyline of the Ukraine crisis.¹⁷ In fact, it can be argued that in Putin’s version of 21st century warfare, as evidenced in Crimea, information warfare is as important to achieving the objective as the actual maneuvering of military forces.

Throughout the operation, Russian authorities, including Putin, explicitly denied any involvement by Russian military forces and pushed the storyline that this was a grass-roots uprising of the people in Crimea against the “fascist” government in Kiev.¹⁸ These lies were repeated daily, even after it was clear that Russian-speaking troops wearing unmarked Russian military style uniforms and driving Russian military vehicles

with Russian military license plates were in Crimea.¹⁹ However, by maintaining even this shred of deniability, Putin provided an excuse for Western political and business leaders to avoid imposing sanctions or taking other meaningful action against Russia.²⁰

Continuing the campaign of information warfare employed throughout the Crimea operation, Putin suggested in his address to Russian lawmakers that the treaty between Russia and Ukraine concerning the status of Russian naval bases in Crimea was a legal basis, both at home and internationally, for Russia’s actions in Crimea:

“Secondly, and most importantly — what exactly are we violating? True, the President of the Russian Federation received permission from the Upper House of Parliament to use the Armed Forces in Ukraine. However, strictly speaking, nobody has acted on this permission yet. Russia’s Armed Forces never entered Crimea; they were there already in line with an international agreement.”²¹

By referencing this treaty, even out of context, Putin provided justification for the lies Russian authorities told during the Crimea operation concerning military force. This spin fits within the storyline Russia promoted, in that the annexation of Crimea was not a foreign military intervention or a violation of state sovereignty, but rather the democratic process of self-determination backed

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by international law and legal precedent. Putin further accentuated this point in his address:

“They keep talking of some Russian intervention in Crimea, some sort of aggression. This is strange to hear. I cannot recall a single case in the history of an intervention without a single shot being fired and with no human casualties.”²²

Having successfully manipulated the facts to support his objective, Putin went on to use this same address to “close the deal” by requesting that Russian lawmakers officially annex Crimea.



Ukrainian soldiers at a military base outside Simferopol, Crimea, peer through a gate at Russian soldiers in March 2014. Armed Russian troops in uniforms without insignia surrounded Ukrainian military installations throughout Crimea.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Russia also relied heavily on propaganda to sway public opinion and further sow discord in an already fractured Ukraine. One example was the continued belief among many in the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine that the use of the Russian language had been banned.²³ The Russian propaganda machine propagated the lie through manipulation and omission of facts. It is true that Ukraine’s post-Maiden parliament voted to repeal the 2012 law permitting more than one official language; however, Ukraine’s acting president, Oleksandr Turchynov, refused to sign the bill until “a new bill to protect all languages is passed.”²⁴ Russia’s propaganda machine exploited the passing of a bill that would have effectively banned the Russian language for official purposes, while conveniently ignoring that it was never signed into law and that the Russian language was never “banned.” Other inflammatory propaganda statements included: “Banderovtsy could storm into Crimea,” “the Black Sea Fleet bases could be taken over by NATO” and “Ukrainian citizens could be de-Russified.”²⁵

Propaganda was also heavily leveraged in Crimea

during the run up to the secession referendum. Through fear-mongering, manipulation of the truth and false accusations, Russia and pro-Russian politicians in Crimea attempted to frame the referendum as a choice between joining Russia on the one hand and yielding to fascism on the other.²⁶ One such advertisement, whose author is unknown, depicted this choice succinctly through two pictures of Crimea, one superimposed with a Nazi flag, the other superimposed with a Russian flag. Above the two images, written in Russian, were the words, “On 16 March We Choose.”²⁷ While not subtle, this was but one example of messaging designed to build support among the populace for the Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea.

Finally, the referendum results and ensuing annexation were themselves critical components of Russia’s information campaign in Crimea. The referendum results, widely viewed in the West as having been achieved through fraud and/or intimidation, indicated that well over 90 percent of Crimean voters supported joining Russia.^{28, 29} These results, as corrupted as they might be, were used by Putin to help legitimize Russia’s actions in Crimea during his March 18 address to Russian lawmakers:

“A referendum was held in Crimea on March 16 in full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms. More than 82 percent of the electorate took part in the vote. Over 96 percent of them spoke out in favor of reuniting with Russia. These numbers speak for themselves.”³⁰

By masking Russia’s annexation of Crimea behind a democratic facade, Putin was able to delegitimize internal and international criticism of Russia’s violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty.

CRIMEA: FIRST OR LAST VICTIM?

One of the most important questions is whether Crimea is an isolated event or the first demonstration of Russia’s new capability to successfully operate militarily and geopolitically in the 21st century. In other words, can or will another Crimea-like event happen? To answer this question, one must first take into account the special circumstances in Crimea that enabled Russia to succeed. Russian political and security policy expert Dr. Mikhail Tsypkin identifies eight enabling factors that contributed to Russia’s success in Crimea:

1. A pre-existing network of pro-Russian political activists were active in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.
2. Russian special forces are culturally identical to the local population of Crimea.
3. Ukrainian security forces were demoralized, corrupt and disloyal to the Ukrainian central government.
4. The massive propaganda campaign in the media

appealed to the target audience in Crimea.

5. This target audience was incensed by the existing socio-economic situation.
6. An unusually inept central government held power in Kiev.
7. Ukraine lacked a well-established national identity shared by the whole country.
8. Geopolitically, Ukraine is more important to Russia than it is to the U.S. and major European powers.³¹

In addition to Dr. Tsypkin's eight factors, it was also critical that there were Russian military bases in Crimea capable of providing cover and staging areas for invading Russian forces. Tsypkin says that these factors suggest that a Crimea-type operation could be successfully conducted only in "post-Soviet territories with substantial Russian language diasporas,"³² in which the circumstances are similar to those that existed in Crimea at the time of the Russian annexation.

Crimea may indeed be a special case where many factors shaped an environment that was uniquely permissive to Russian operations. Nonetheless, it should serve as a warning shot to the world, particularly Russia's neighbors, of Russia's capabilities and potential for future actions. Specifically, any state that hosts Russian military forces or is home to a sizable Russian diaspora must now factor the possibility of a Russian intervention into its strategic calculus.

CONCLUSION

Russian actions in Crimea clearly demonstrate that not only does Russia have the will to use military force to redraw international borders in Europe, but, more alarmingly, it has the capability as well. It is clear that Russia maintains an elite force of highly trained, professional and very capable special forces units that can be wielded to great effect on the battlefields of the 21st century. Combined with an effective usage of information warfare, this provides Russia with the means to enforce its will upon other states within the geopolitical context of the 21st century.

It is too early to question the wisdom of the recent U.S. policy decision to "pivot" strategically to the Asia-Pacific region; however, if a newly emboldened Russia continues to pursue policy objectives with military force, this could quickly alter the calculus of European stability. The U.S. and President Barack Obama appear to understand this, with the announcement in June 2014 of an additional \$1 billion in spending to bolster the U.S. military presence in Europe and reassure nervous allies of U.S. commitment to the region.³³ Only time will tell if this commitment is enough. □

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