

The Crimean War: A Geopolitical View of the Conflicts in the Black Sea

Quest Club

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Until recently, most of us may not have heard about Crimea and the Crimean war. Some of us may even have associated Crimea with the Crimean-Congo, a viral disease that is widely spread in Africa, Middle east and some parts of Europe including Crimea. Since the Crimean disease is not the topic of my paper, suffice it to say that the history of Crimea and its political struggles were not in our radar screen until recently.

One of the main reasons that Crimea dominated our media recently and captivated our imagination is because it involves the major power players in the world: Russia on the one hand and NATO on the other. The cause of the Crimean war stems out of the geopolitical tensions created by the players' need for control and resources.

Moreover, what makes this topic very interesting to me, personally, is that it reminds me of my own journey. The country of Eritrea, where I came from, is one of the areas in the world that was and is very much affected by the regional and, international geopolitical conflicts. The Turks, who were one of the players in the Crimean history, as we will see shortly, were also involved in the Red Sea theater, especially Eritrea, and are responsible for the expansion of Islam into an area that was predominantly known as a Christian region.

USSR was also one of the major players in Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia. After the collapse of the colonial systems, the powers to be fought their proxy wars in the Red Sea region, and that impacted the lives of many people like myself and is the reason that we find ourselves in the Western world.

To be sure, one of the things that are an integral part of the human history is people movement. People migrate for different reasons, but at the heart of it all is the basic need for safety and security. National boundaries were drawn, redrawn and continue to be redrawn, which causes people groups to engage in a pull and push dynamics that sometimes trigger conflicts such as the one we are witnessing in the Ukrainian conflict.

So where in the World is Crimea? This is not meant to insult your intelligence by asking such a trivia. I ask the question only to set the stage for the geopolitical conflict that has become a hot flush for a Cold War style conflict between the West and the Russian Republic, which I believe has greater implications than just a chess game for a territorial control.

This paper will have three sections: first, I will locate Crimea geographically and historically and its importance in that region; second, I will address the geopolitical importance of Crimea throughout its history; third, will conclude with a brief discussion on the global geopolitical consequences of the Crimean case, if Russian aggression is left unchecked.

The People of Crimea

Crimea, a peninsula, nestled in southern Ukraine, is a very strategic place in the Black Sea. The Greeks, Russian Empire, Turkey and now Ukraine have had their hands on it. However, the history of this small but strategic peninsula would not be complete without discussing its natives, or the earlier settlers. Julia Ilyina states that the “ethnic composition in Crimea began developing between the 6th and 17th century (Ilyina, 2014:14). Ilyina writes,

Most importantly, the Crimean ecosystem (the coast, steppe and the mountains) has contributed to attracting different peoples from different sides of the regions. The coastal area was an attraction for European travelers and fishermen that had crossed the Black Sea and settled in the south of Crimea (Greeks, Goths, Adyghe, Armenians, Genoese, Italians, Alans and Venetians). The northern steppe (two-thirds of the Crimean territory) was a get-away for tribes and nomads. The nomads that migrated from the east to the steppe were Khazars, Mongols, Kipchacks, Huns, Schythians, Pechenegs and Sarmatians. (Ilyina: 14).

The mountains were used as hiding places for the ethnic minorities when the steppes became dangerous. In other words, the settlement of the ethnic groups that formed the Tatars were determined by where they came from and what socio-economic groups they happen to belong to. The wealthy Europeans, who traveled to Crimea for vacation and fishery, settled in the coastal areas, while the nomadic people groups, who came from the east, settled in the steppe and the mountains.

Though the formation of the Tatar ethnic groups is still debatable, the documentation of the Tatars, as ethnic groups, was discovered since the formation of “a state in Crimea in the mid-15th century” (Ilyina:14).

The identity of the Crimean Tatars was so much tied to the land they occupied like all people groups in the two-thirds world would (Williams, 1998: 287). A group of people who came from different parts of Europe and Asia formed an ethnic identity known as the Tatars. However, the

Crimean nation-building started later when the Russian Empire annexed the peninsula in 1783 (Williams: 226). The Russians “dissolved the Crimean Khanate”, which brought the Turkic population to stagnate for more than hundred years.

The pressure from the Russian Christian colonizers forced many of the Tatars to migrate into Turkey to seek religious freedom in an Islamic state (Williams: 228). The highest rate of Tatars’ voluntary migration, however, took place during the Crimean War in 1853-56 (Ilyina: 17). Due to the migration of the Tatars and the numerical growth of the Russian and Ukrainian settlers, the Tatars became one-third of the total population of Crimea after the Russian annexation of the peninsula in 1783 (Williams: 68).

The USSR completed the total migration of the Tatars after the II World War. Because of the Crimean Tatars’ support for the German invasion during the Second World War (few thousand Crimean Tatars were enlisted in the German army) the Communist regime repatriated all Crimean Tatars to central Asia. Ilyina puts it this way:

It seems that the communist leaders finally fulfilled the Tsarist long-lasting aspiration to have “Crimea without Crimean Tatars” which began with Catharine II. In other words, as mentioned in earlier chapters, the idea of having Crimea without the multiethnic population was already planted during the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by the Tsarist Empire (Ilyina: 27).

The Crimean Tatars were banned from returning into Crimea until Mikhail Gorbachev’s new policies, Perestroika and glasnost, took effect in the Soviet Republic (Williams: 243). However, the return to Crimea was slow during the Communist regime; only 38,000 Crimean Tatars returned into Crimea during this time. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, the independence of Ukraine from Russia changed all that. 266,000 Crimean Tatars returned to Crimea making the Tatars population 13.6% of the total Crimean population (OSCE census 2013: 3)

According to a report by BBC, the population make up of Crimea is now 58% Ethnic Russians, 24% Ukrainians, 12% Tatars, and 6% others (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18287223>). Some other demographers put the Russian population up to 60%. A population make up engineered by a Russian two centuries of expansionist posture has changed the Crimean socio-political context that is highly favorable to the Russian vision for its empire. This, as I will demonstrate in the coming pages, is what is behind the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Unchecked by the powers in the West, especially NATO, the Russian expansionist posture will continue to impact nations that have Russian speaking population for years to come.

History of Crimea

The Ottoman Empire was one of the major players in the formation of the Crimean culture and politics. The Turkic Tatars, were considered as the natives or at least the earliest settlers of the peninsula. They were Muslims, who did not like the Russian occupiers and always sided with the opposite power in all Crimean conflicts involving Russia.

One of the earliest competitors of the Russian Empire was the Ottoman Empire. A power to be reckoned with, at its hey days, the Ottoman Empire ruled from Egypt, Libya, Greece to South Eastern Europe. Blake states:

The Turkish Empire had been decaying since 1822, when her boundaries had included (in modern terms) Yugoslavia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Greece, Jordan, Egypt and Libya. Turkey, at that time, was ruled by the Sultan, Mahmud II, backed by a chief minister and a council of ministers called the Divan. The whole government was known as the 'Sublime Porte' – that is 'the gate' – the place where, traditionally, magistrates and princes sat to administer justice (Blake, 1972: 2).

The Turkish influence in Crimea is very obvious. The Turkic Tatars, were at some point the largest ethnic group until Russia invaded Crimea in 1783. The Russians did not trust the Tatars, and the Tatars did not like the Russians. Especially the religious difference played a great role in the relationships between the Russians and the Tatars. The Tatars believed that Crimea had become 'dar al-harb' , a place where Islam is not worshiped, and this explains why many of them would migrate to "the holy lands of Islam in Turkey" (Ilyina: 18).

Moreover the Russian expansionist ambition played a great role in the geopolitics of the region, especially as the protector of the Eastern Orthodox Communion. The tsars considered themselves as "the rightful protectors of the holy places of Palestine and they took a dim view of the Latins' pretensions." The protection of the Eastern Church and its holy sites was to become the impetus for the wars that were fought in Turkey, which led to the Crimean war of 1853 (Royle, 2000:17-19).

The Russian Relationship with Western Christianity was not the greatest either. The Crusaders wrath turned into the Eastern Church in 1204 increased the enmity between the east and west, and culminated in the schism of 1453. This was to increase the tension between Russia and the Western Europeans, especially France and Great Britain. And this was to be the foundation for forming the allies against the Russian empire. The allied members included one of the arch enemies of the Crusaders, the Ottoman Empire or Turkey.

Furthermore, for the Russians, the reason for the conflict with Turkey and The West in the 19th century was to protect the Eastern Christians' rights. The explanation was given as a reason for

the invasion of Turkey by the Russian Empire that led to the so called the "Crimean War" of 1853-56. Blake states:

Nicholas I soon returned to his plan to expel the Turks from Europe. By the treaty of Bucharest in 1812, Russia's frontier with Turkey had been established on the River Pruth, while Russia had been given a 'right of intervention' on behalf of the Christian subjects in the two Danubian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, which lie between the Pruth and the Danube. This right of intervention to protect the members of the Greek Orthodox Church in a Moslem country was one of the main themes of the Eastern Question, and a constant excuse for invasion or war (Blake: 4).

The tsars used religious protection as a pretext both to defend their empire and also expand it. And this expansionist spirit was to bring some strange bedfellows into a pact to oppose the Russians in an all-out war, which led to what is known as the War of Crimea. The powers that allied against Russia and came to defend Turkey and stop Russia's aggression included: Britain, France, Austria and Prussia (Blake: 8). (What makes this alliance strange bedfellows is the fact that Christian empires were in alliance with a Muslim empire against a Christian Empire.) But knowing the East West conflict of the church, it is not so strange after all.

The battles between Russia and the Allies raged on the Asian Minor, Turkish and European fronts. The Russians were defeated on all fronts, and finally came the War of Crimea, the staging place of the Russian aggression in and around the Black Sea.

Palmer explains the British motive for joining the allies to fight the Russians in Crimea very clearly, and writes, "There was already a tradition of Anglo-Russian hostility over the Eastern Question, caused partly by fear that Britain's trade would suffer if the Black Sea became a Russian lake and partly weight in Europe's affairs" (Palmer, 1987: 4). I am sure the other members of the allies had their own reasons for entering the war, one of which is to defend their borders and their national territorial integrity; for Great Britain, however, the reason for involvement in the Crimean War seems more economical than east-west religious agenda.

As the allies charged towards Crimea into the city of Sebastopol, a formidable Russian army was ready for them. Though the city finally fell and the allies seemed to have won the battle, both claimed victory. The Russians just camped north of the city while the allies lost their appetite to pursue the retreating army; neither of them seemed to have won. It was a stalemate with 13,000 dead on the Russian side and 10,000 on the allied side.

The point of this is not to tell the war story but to indicate Russia's involvement in Crimea beyond the recent conflict. Russia had a long history of ruling Crimea. Moreover, Russia's social engineering by systematically displacing the earlier settlers and populating the peninsula with Russians made it possible for what took place in recent days.

Crimean Geopolitical Time-Line

Crimea, as I mentioned earlier, has gone through multiple hands in its more than three millennium history. As the Greeks' most northern colony in 1500 BC (www.timelines.ws/countries/UKRAINE.HTML), I have no doubt that it played a very strategic role in the preservation and defense of the Greek Empire. It makes sense that the Greeks' would have an eye on Crimea, because it is the gateway to the Russian Empire and the western world.

Fast forward into the middle ages, the Ottoman Empire established its presence in the Crimea in 1475 (<http://www.crimeahistory.org/timeline-of-the-history-of-crimea/>), and created the Crimean Khanate. This marked the expansion of the Islamic movement northwards toward Russia. Moscow then raided the Crimean Khanate from 1500-1700; the defenders of the Eastern Orthodoxy were not to let the Ottoman Empire overrun them and destroy their faith tradition. And this war was finally brought to its victorious end when the Russians annexed Crimea in 1783.

The Turkic Khanate was dismantled by the Russians, and Crimea was to become the staging point for its military aggression against the Ottoman Empire for years to come until it came to an end during the Crimean War of 1853-56. On March 30, 1856, Russia signed the Treaty of Paris that basically ended the Crimean War. "It guaranteed the integrity of Ottoman Turkey and obliged Russia to surrender the southern Bessarabia, at the mouth of the Danube. The Black Sea was neutralized, and the Danube River was opened to the shipping of all nations," (www.timelines.ws/countries/UKRAINE.HTML).

Growing up, I heard the cliché that said, "the sun never sets on the British Empire." If nothing else, the Crimean War of 1853-56 is an indication of the impact of the Western powers to influence world trade. Everything that they have done in the geopolitical theaters of the world is about ensuring their right of way for their commercial fleets. And in some cases they used religion as a pretext to accomplish their commercial goals. And no wonder why Lenin and Marx would claim religion as the opiate of the mass or the poor. (This is a topic for another day) – Suffice it to say though, that the idea -the enemy of my enemy is my friend - is quit appropriate in this case. The Ottoman Turkey desire would be nothing less than the eradication of Christianity and the establishment of the Islamic Rule; however, their goals of stopping the Russians from dominating the region colluded with that of the Western concern for loss of trade rout. This makes the allies in the Crimean War, in my view, strange bedfellows; we have plenty of such examples going on in the world right now as we fight ISIL, Al Qaeda, Boko Haram and all other religious extremists.

A Crimean construction of a railroad system was completed in 1875. This further intensified the value of Crimea as a trade center. As The Crimean History website explains it, “the construction of the railway to the city of Sevastopol was completed and opened the vast Russian and European market for agricultural products, wine and confectionary. Business, trade and industry developed rapidly,” (<http://www.crimeahistory.org/timeline-of-the-history-of-crimea/>). The end of the Crimean War was, after all, good for all parties involved. The Western countries got their access to the Black Sea and the Danube River, while the Russians had the European market opened for them. It all makes sense for a market based economy. However, all that was to change after the World Wars and the formation of The Soviet Union.

It may seem very convoluted, but bear with me here as I recount the events of history in the early 20th century of the Crimean world. Ukraine proclaimed independence from Russia in 1917, the Red Army seize Kiev on February 20, 1918. On March 3, 1918 Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, the Ottoman Empire and Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk; this ended Russia’s participation in World War I. “Germany forced Russia to sign the Peace of Brest, which called for the establishment of 5 independent countries: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine.” The treaty was annulled by the November 1918 armistice. (www.timeline.ws/countries/UKRAINE.HTML).

Why would this be important for Crimea? Its importance stems from the fact that the rest of the story is told as part of an enmeshed relationship between the Ukrainians the Russians and the territory of Crimea. In 1918-1921, Crimea became the scene of very fierce Civil War battles. The German Empire then intervened and brought it to an end. Soviet Union granted Crimea its independence on October 18, 1921. However, Crimea was never independent. From 1922 to 1991, Crimea was part of the Soviet Union, either as part of the SSR Russia or the SSR Ukraine. To be more specific, the presidium of the Supreme Soviet Union on February 19, 1954, through a decree gave Crimea to Ukraine as a gift, for “the commonality of the economy, the proximity, and close economic and cultural relations between the Crimean region and the Ukraine SSR,” (<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/848755.shtml>). However, it was still the same union, and nothing was lost or given away.

To be sure, Crimea as part of Ukraine is the shortest part of the story. As Skrukwa has demonstrated, “Crimea is undoubtedly the most distinct and specific of present day Ukraine, enjoying a special administrative status – that of an outonomic republic. ... It is an area rife with conflict, with waxing and waning separatist tendencies, (Skrukwa, 2011:135). Skrukwa continues, “it is the area part of the Ukraine for the shortest time,” (137).

In 1991, Ukraine declared its independence. Crimea remained part of the new Ukrainian state, and every negotiation that involved the Russians from there on included Crimea as part of the territorial reality of the new geopolitics of the new world order in the Black Sea.

Moreover, Boris Yeltsin was not successful in forming a unified army for and with the former Soviet Union countries of Ukraine, Moldova and Azerbaijan in 1992, thus, ended the Soviet influence as we knew it or at least hope thereof.

However, this also has not solidly established Ukraine as a safe independent nation. There were many things left unanswered that now are rearing their ugly heads. What happens to the Russians in Crimea and in Ukraine? What will be the role of the Black Sea Fleet in the Russo-Ukraine relationship? Was giving up the nuclear weapons the best strategy for Ukraine? Is Russia to be trusted? There have been many treaties signed and annulled by the Russians in their history; what would make the Russians trustworthy of keeping the Budapest Memorandum of Understanding that essentially disarmed Ukraine in exchange for assurance of its territorial integrity and security? Are the Russians having second thoughts about the independence of Ukraine? Will the Russians invade Ukraine the way they did to Crimea with the pretext of protecting Ukrainian Russian speakers? These are, but few of the questions I kept asking as I did my research for this paper, and are probably questions that Ukrainians are asking these days.

The 21st Century Crimea

Biersack & O'Lear write:

With Russia's annexation of Crimea occurring on 18 March 2014, resulting in international condemnation, sanctions, and further conflict, the Russian government needed to complicate the storyline of who annexed whom. On 11 July 2014, Sergei Naryshkin, the speaker of Russia's lower house of parliament, made the puzzling claim that Crimea was annexed by Ukraine in 1991. How could Ukraine annex a part of itself that had been within its borders since 1954? (Biersack & O'Lear, 2014: 1).

Unless someone is glib enough to believe that Ukraine was independent or autonomous in 1954 from the oppressive hands of the Muscovites, Ukraine was just as Russian as Crimea was. However, as repressive governments do, the communists would not hesitate to realign territories for administrative reasons. The communists were sure that capitalism would disappear from the face of the earth. Communism would prevail, and there would not be a need for national boundaries, at least in concept. Theirs was truly a utopia controlled by dictators, and that in itself is a contradiction. 1954 was Nikiti Khrushchev the communist acting; 2014 is Vladimir Putin the 21st century tsarist thinking about his empire. Both are two faces of the same coin.

Why would one say that the territorial integrity of Ukraine should include Crimea? Of course 1954 is the starting point. Crimea, however, as I have demonstrated earlier, has an almost two centuries history with Russia and the Soviet Socialist Republic of Russia than with Ukraine.

What I would like to do from here on is to present the timeline that led to the annexation of Crimea from 1991 to 2014.

According to the Global Times, Ukraine and Russia agreed on the division of the Black Sea Fleet in 1992, and was ratified at the Treaty of Friendship in 1997, which gave Russia 80% of the fleet and 20 year lease of Crimean facilities on the port of Sevastopol (<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/848755.shtml>).

With the election of pro-Russian president, Victor Yanukovich, Ukraine was playing into Russia's hands. The new president navigated his way through the Ukrainian political jungle to pass through a legislation to allow Russia use Sevastopol for its fleet until 2042. And in the same year the parliament sealed the movement away from NATO into the Russian block (www.timeline.ws/countries/UKRAIN.HTML).

What Yanukovich succeeded to do was to effectively split the country into pro-Russian and pro-NATO camps. The Russian speaking population sided with him and opposed the demand for his resignation. The majority of the country, however, wanted to be closely allied with the west, especially NATO. The conflict on both sides of the issue claimed more than 100 lives, and finally Yanukovich resigned and fled the country on February 21st, 2013, opening the door for the new government, which would be pro west overnight, to emerge.

The Russian plan to annex Crimea, and the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine were set in motion at the resignation of Yanukovich. Russian and Russia influenced media also voiced their propaganda in framing the debate for the Russian audience. Biersack & O'Lear write:

Russia responded to the loss of a friendly government by setting events in motion that led to the annexation of Crimea. Russian government-friendly media and the Russian government itself condemned the new acting Ukrainian government as puppets of a EU/US-backed coup. The EU and the US both pledged to support the new Ukrainian government, further ensuring Russia's sense of loss and continuing to make Ukraine a geopolitical battleground between Russia and the west," (Biersack & O'Lear: 2).

This feels like we are back to a Cold War style conflict between the Western powers and the Russians. As the writing of this paper, a cease fire signed between the conflicting parties seems to be holding. I just hope that it will lead to a permanent peace.

It is important at this point to discuss the Crimean political factors that contributed to its annexation. Malyarenko and Galbreath write, "Crimea is not so central to either Ukraine or Russia's national historiography, but rather its place within the Russian Empire and later Russian Federal Soviet Socialist Republic combined with the location of the Black Sea Fleet makes the peninsula contested in terms of geopolitical location and loyalties," (Malyarenko

and Galbreath, 2013:916). The energy resource rich basin of the Black Sea is now another great reason for Russia to consider for the annexation; it just was too convenient to ignore. This being said, how did the Crimean people contribute to the event?

First, the discussion of the events and actions that poised Crimea for eventual secession from Ukraine and reunification with Russia is in place. As early as 1992, the Crimean Supreme Council declared independence pending a referendum – Ukraine countered calling it illegal and giving the Crimean Supreme Council an ultimatum to withdraw its decisions, and the council rescinded its decision. Mind you, Ukraine still had the third largest nuclear arsenal, and even Russia would not dare challenge it at this point. The following year, 1993, the “Crimean parliament called for the creation of a presidential position for the autonomous republic.” Finally, Crimean protest against NATO military drills in the Sea Breeze. (<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/848755.shtml>).

Second, The presence of the Russian Black Sea Fleet: Crimea and the Black Sea are held as geo-strategically important for both Russia and Ukraine. Both want to have a strong presence in Crimea and the Black Sea. The Ukrainians thought they had the guarantee for their territorial integrity and the presence in the Black Sea in the 1994 Treaty of Non-Proliferation, but they were so wrong. Now the nuclear arsenal of its hands, Ukraine is at the mercy of nuclear Russia. Moreover, as Biersack and O’Leary said it, “The masked troops in Crimea are a microcosm of the entwined histories of the peoples and states now making the territories of Crimea,” (Biersack & O’Leary: 3). And this leads us to the third point, which is the most critical of all; it is about the people.

Third, the Russian majority and the second largest ethnic group, the Ukrainians, vote as a block. Even though the Russian ethnic group are the majority and do not need any other block to chart their course, the Ukrainians joined ranks with the Russians. All the decisions made by the Supreme Council and the parliament were, I assume, with some support by the Ukrainian ethnic group.

The question to ask is: was this really an annexation or a systematic and very smooth transfer of power? Most of the Crimean population seems to have wanted closer ties with Russia. Ukraine, on the other hand was looking to the west, NATO. The weakening of the central government in Kiev was an opportune time to fulfill a long awaited desire of Crimea to separate from Ukraine. Independence was not a choice, because Ukraine had a stronger army; joining with Russia seems the logical choice and the choice that they seem to have taken.

Does it matter if the annexation of Crimea is legal? I do not think it matters at this point. Crimea is now part of the Russian Empire, and it shall remain as such into the foreseeable future, unless Russia’s leadership changes its attitude and decides to abide by its treaties,

especially the 1994 non-proliferation treaty that guaranteed territorial integrity for Ukraine in exchange for giving up its nuclear arsenal.

Global Implications

Paul Dibb, Emeritus Professor of Strategic Studies at The Australian National University, begins his reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, saying,

Russia's invasion of Ukraine's Crimea territory in March 2014 has raised serious questions about the end of the post-Cold War era. The spectacle of Russian troops ignoring the sovereignty of Ukraine's borders and annexing Crimea has taken us back to a world long forgotten – particularly in Europe. This is a world where the sanctity of internationally recognized borders is ignored, the use of military force is back in command and where a nuclear-armed major power acts with impunity in its own neighborhood, (Dibb, 2014: 3).

Dibb does not think that the Soviet Union is back. However, he sees a real threat to the other eastern bloc countries that recently joined NATO: Moldova, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (6).

Moreover, Dibb adds his concern about the global implication of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. He believes that this would embolden authoritarian regimes, like China, to flex their muscles and follow Russian example in the aftermath of a weak Western response to this crisis. He observed China is already doing just that in the East China Sea and the South China Sea (9).

The Ethiopian and Eritrean border conflict of 1998 to 2000 is a great example that could support Dibb's concern. The Ethio-Eritrean conflict in those two short years claimed the lives of more than 100,000 people, and the border issue is not yet resolved. Conflict can flare at any time and more atrocities committed to lives, properties and the liberty of the people around. Thus, similar conflicts could be ignited over minor border issues by stronger nations and escalate it to the level that the Ukrainians are going through right now. So what should a strong NATO response look like to stop the aggression and to send the message to others that such a behavior shall not be tolerated? This is the question!!

Conclusion

If there is anything learned from the Ukrainian conflict in the last year and now, it is that the Russian empire is back. Vladimir Putin, as any of the dictators around the world would, will defend his position, even if it breaks international law and violates international boundaries.

He does not like the encroachment of the NATO alliance to his borders, and in order to secure his position and guarantee his national security, he will destabilize his neighbors and remind all of us that he and his empire are still players in global geopolitics.

This can, however, cause for things to get out of hand in a hurry. And how the West responds to his aggression will be critical. Will sanctions help? Or are economic sanctions the way to go in curbing this aggressive actor in Eastern Europe? Is a better approach to arm the Ukrainians and balance the power? Moreover, is the solution a military solution?

We have seen the impact of wars. With the amount of lethal power at the disposal of the military powers, humans have achieved the capability to destroy themselves. Military power is never the solution, but only a deterrent to get to a negotiated solution. The balanced approach that NATO and the US are taking at this point seems to be the right approach.

The big question is, will Crimea ever be free from Moscow's grip? It depends on who is in power in Russia. As for now, it seems that its fate is permanently sealed. Russia will never release its grip of Crimea nor Crimea be able to break away on its own.

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