

Four Challenges Facing a Ukrainian-Russian Truce. Part III: The Crimean Conundrum

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Executive Summary

There is currently an intense debate about scenarios for ending, or at least freezing, Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Most observers acknowledge that meaningful negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow can only happen after a successful Ukrainian offensive. A gap is emerging, however, between Ukraine and some of its foreign partners concerning the future of Crimea. A majority of non-Ukrainian policymakers and opinion shapers seek to compartmentalize the reversal of Russia's two annexations of 2014 and 2022. While a restoration of Ukrainian territorial integrity in all or most of mainland Ukraine is widely accepted throughout the expert community, a return of the Black Sea peninsula to Kyiv's control is often seen as impossible, at least in the near future. The proposed division of aims for a temporary solution to the conflict is frequently presented as a pragmatic, "realistic" and prudent strategy for negotiations.

However, these approaches ignore the political and economic implications of the fundamental geographic condition of Crimea – its close and multiple connections to the Ukrainian drylands to its north. Alongside the overarching Russian aim of taking full political control over Ukraine, Moscow's full-scale 2022 invasion was also motivated by the geological, historical, economic and other links between Ukraine's Black Sea Peninsula and the south-eastern mainland. These "rational" determinants for Moscow's deeper incursion into the Donbas and parts of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions are often ignored or underestimated.

As a result, Russia's readiness and ability to forego the Moscow-controlled land connection between Crimea and Russia is overestimated. Following liberation of Ukraine's mainland, Crimea, as in 2014–22, would be an annexed exclave of the Russian Federation. It is already and will continue to lack freshwater from mainland Ukraine and a land connection to Russia. It would continue to suffer from an exclusion from international trade, financial exchange and investment, as well as from geopolitical insecurity. Western policy shapers and policymakers should acknowledge these circumstances of the occupied peninsula and support a full restoration of Ukrainian territorial integrity. Instead of advancing an unsustainable diplomatic half-solution that runs counter to both Kyiv's and Moscow's interests, the West should provide Ukraine with enough and suitable weaponry to quickly liberate all Russia-occupied territories, including Crimea.

Introduction

The irreversibility, at least in the short term, of Russia's annexation of Crimea has, for more than nine years now been a widespread commonplace among non-Ukrainian opinion formers and policymakers on Russia and Ukraine. Most serious analysts acknowledge the destructive and genocidal motives of Moscow's attack on Ukraine. They therefore accept that Kyiv should liberate most or even all of mainland Ukraine as soon as possible – either by military or non-military means.

In contrast, Moscow's capture of the Black Sea peninsula may – according to compartmentalizing approaches of many observers, politicians and diplomats – have to be accepted as a *fait accompli*. Sometimes, such assertions are made with reference to Vladimir Putin's high level of personal investment in his initial 2014 enlargement of, according to Moscow, Russian state territory. Sometimes, the Kremlin's claim of a putatively fundamental role of Crimea and its largest city, Sevastopol, in Russian history and/or regional affairs, are acknowledged to one degree or another.

The geostrategic relevance of the Crimean Peninsula is for some observers a reason to support Ukraine's recapture of that part of its territory. If Moscow were allowed to continue to control Crimea, this would have far-reaching implications not only for Ukraine's geopolitics, stability and trade routes. It would also be dangerous for other Black Sea countries as well as for NATO and the European Union, to which some of these littoral states belong.

A justified fear is that Russia's continued occupation of Crimea will allow the Kremlin to transform the Black Sea, as it has already done with the Azov Sea, into a Russian lake. The conflicting interests in the Black Sea of, on the one side, Russia and, on the other side, countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey or Georgia – not to mention Ukraine itself – are obvious. They have considerable potential for future escalation of regional tensions if the Kremlin is allowed to keep its foot in Crimea. This is a salient argument in favour of Crimea's return to Ukraine as soon as possible.

However, it is also a line of reasoning that works in the opposite direction. The increased security and control that Kyiv would achieve in the Black Sea after the liberation of the peninsula will be perceived as a respective reduction of influence for Moscow. In this zero-sum situation, the higher Ukraine's geostrategic gains are, the greater will be Russia's losses. The wider security-political relevance of Crimea is thus a valid but also tricky argument for supporters of Ukraine. It can be turned around by alleged "realists" to the effect that Crimea's very geostrategic significance is such large a challenge that it should be taken off the table.

The Myopia of the Pragmatists

Excluding a return of the Black Sea peninsula to Kyiv's control from deliberation of scenarios for ending the Russian-Ukrainian war is, against this background, often presented as pragmatic. It may indeed appear at first glance to be a sensible plan for moving forward and setting achievable aims. Such thinking overlooks, however, some salient geographic, economic and political realities of Crimea's past, present and future. A compartmentalization of the Crimea issue, on the one hand, and efforts to achieve a preliminary peace, on the other, ignores basic facts on the ground.

Such approaches misinterpret or/and misrepresent key sources and dynamics of the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2022, if not before. In particular, Moscow's

capture of south-east Ukrainian mainland territories last year was not only driven by the overarching goals of destroying the Ukrainian state and nation, and of taking political control over the whole country. It was also designed to reinforce and support the Russian annexation of Crimea that had happened eight years before.

Unlike the recent illegal dryland expansion of Russia's state territory into Ukraine's south, Moscow's 2014 acquisition of the Black Sea peninsula had been enthusiastically supported by most Russians nine years ago. It is still valued highly today by the citizens and elites of Russia. Crimea's occupation remains a source of legitimacy and popularity for Putin's regime.

However, the first Russian annexation was an incomplete, costly and risky undertaking. It added an illegal exclave to Russia's claimed state territory far away from Russian core lands. Although not the main war goal, one of the functions of Russia's recent full-scale invasion was to make the peninsula's continued occupation more sustainable. In terms of securing – from Moscow's point of view – the geoeconomic and geopolitical viability of occupied Crimea, the peninsula's proper incorporation into an illegally expanded Russia was completed only in 2022. Russia's recent acquisition of the drylands to the north of the peninsula has, from the Kremlin's perspective, made the capture of Crimea more rational and integral.

Against this background, a strategic division of Western policy vis-à-vis Moscow into ending Russia's occupation of mainland Ukraine, on the one hand, while postponing a reversal of Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea, on the other, is misguided. This self-deception concerns Crimea's material conditions on the ground, and – some partly justified – subjective considerations about its future within the Kremlin. The peninsula's current occupation by Russia could hypothetically continue after a partial restoration of Ukrainian territorial integrity on the mainland. Yet, this popular scenario would not just be unsatisfactory for Kyiv. It would also pose strategic challenges for Moscow in at least four ways.

The Freshwater Problem

First, between 2014 and 2022, occupied Crimea's economy faced a growing process water deficit. The peninsula has always had only limited freshwater reserves of its own, in as far as the Black Sea's water is salty and therefore unsuitable for most economic purposes. This problem had been resolved in late and post-Soviet periods, when the North Crimean Canal brought freshwater from the Dnipro River across Ukraine's southern mainland to the peninsula via the Isthmus of Perekop.

When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, however, Ukraine blocked operation of the North Crimean Canal. As a result, the Russian occupying administration depleted more and more of the peninsula's meagre local freshwater reserves. In the absence of other sources of process water, Moscow destroyed the ecological balance on the peninsula to keep the economy and infrastructure, including military installations, running. This created a mounting socio-economic and environmental problem for the occupiers.

Ominously, since its capture of the peninsula nine years ago, Moscow has not built a single desalination plant on Crimea. Unlike in the 1960s, when the North Crimean Canal was built, there are today a variety of technologies for desalinating sea water on an industrial scale. The continued absence of any new desalination plants or of any freshwater pipelines from southern Russia to Crimea since 2014 became increasingly telling. Growing process water deficits on the peninsula and Moscow's inactivity in this regard was indicative of Kremlin

strategic thinking. It made the likelihood of a war to capture the North Crimean Canal more likely with every passing year. In the spring of 2022, Moscow temporarily resolved the issue when it captured and reopened the canal.

A partial restoration of Ukrainian territorial integrity, leaving Crimea under Moscow's control, would lead to a second permanent closure of the Canal (in case it is, in principle, operational) by Kyiv. Ukraine cannot politically be expected to support Russia's continued occupation of its territory. Nor would Kyiv under international law be allowed to support an illegal annexation by providing water supplies. This means that liberation of mainland Ukraine but not Crimea would restore for Russia the same problematic situation that existed in 2014–2022. Such a scenario is a material problem for the future of Russia's annexation of Crimea and a challenge of which both Moscow and Kyiv are fully aware. In other words, it is a factor in both Russian and Ukrainian strategic planning.

The Absent Land Connection

The second challenge facing Russia-occupied Crimea in 2014–2022 was the lack of a land corridor to Russia. Moscow's rapid erection and 2019 opening of the Kerch Bridge from Russia to Crimea partly resolved the issue. It ended Russia's reliance on difficult deliveries to and from Crimea by Black Sea ferries operating out of ports in Russia's Krasnodar Krai and Crimea's Kerch sub-peninsula.

However, the new transportation viaduct over the Kerch Straits did not fully resolve the principal geoeconomic issue of Russia-occupied Crimea. Russian institutions, companies and citizens could, until recently, not use the south Ukrainian mainland to transport goods or people to and from Crimea. The economic development of the peninsula was restricted.

Using the Kerch Bridge still meant a costly and time-consuming detour for transit between Central Russia and Crimea. Ukraine's bombing of the bridge in October 2022, moreover, illustrated the fragility of this transport route. It emphasized that the Kerch Bridge remains a vulnerable bottleneck in interactions between the Russian Federation and annexed peninsula.

Only the armed capture of Ukraine's south-eastern mainland in 2022 made a solution to this infrastructure issue theoretically possible for Moscow. The recent Russian annexations of Ukraine's Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions were primarily, to be sure, driven by "irrational" irredentism. They further undermined Ukraine's sovereignty and statehood on the road to taking control of central political power in Kyiv.

However, they were also motivated by "rational" considerations of the current and future needs of Russia-occupied Crimea. Thus far, the new land bridge via south-eastern Ukraine is of only limited use to Russia because of the nearby frontline. Nevertheless, the 2022 annexations have, from Moscow's point of view, opened up future possibilities to better address various developmental, defence and logistical challenges of the occupied peninsula.

The Geopolitical Impasse

A related third problem of Russia's capture of Crimea is its generally precarious status in regional and security-political terms. Crimea was and is far away from the Russian heartland. It belongs geographically and historically to southern Ukraine. Contrary to widespread public perceptions outside of Ukraine, the peninsula was during its pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet periods almost always administratively linked to the Ukrainian dryland to its north. This was the case within the Crimean Khanate (pre-1783), Tsarist Empire (1802–1917), Soviet

Union (1954–1991) and Ukrainian state (1991–2014). The Isthmus of Perekop physically connects Ukraine's peninsula and drylands at the Black Sea.

Before its capture by Catherine the Great in 1783, the Crimean Khanate also covered today's Ukrainian mainland north of the peninsula. In the following Tsarist period, Crimea was part of the Taurida Governate of the Romanov empire. This large administrative district united much of current Ukraine's south. The Taurida Governate included the peninsula, the south Ukrainian drylands, and much of the empire's Black Sea coastline. Yet, the Tsarist district did not comprise any of the territory of today's Russian Federation.

For most of the Soviet period, Crimea belonged to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UkrSSR). Only between 1922 and 1954 was it formally part of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) within the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Soon after Stalin's death in 1953, the peninsula was, by consensual decision of the USSR's collective leadership at that time, transferred from the RSFSR to the UkrSSR.

The reason for this abrupt move was not the frequently alleged whim of flamboyant Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. In fact, the power of Khrushchev, as newly appointed First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's Central Committee, had not yet been consolidated at that time. Instead, the 1954 reunification of Ukraine's Crimea and mainland, by way of the peninsula's transfer to the UkrSSR, was driven by natural factors, administrative rationalization, and economic calculation. The decision by Moscow was spurred by plain geographical facts and logistic needs of Crimea's post-war economic development.¹

As a result, the Soviet period – again contrary to widespread foreign perceptions – strengthened the trading, social and cultural links of the peninsula to the Ukrainian mainland. After Ukraine's independence, the Black Sea peninsula became the Autonomous Republic of Crimea within the newly independent Ukrainian state. While there was some separatism in the 1990s on Crimea, the peninsula's development then had a marked calmness and peacefulness, especially compared to the large-scale violence in nearby former Yugoslavia, Moldova, Chechnya, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The ethnically non-Ukrainian parts of the Crimean population – the peninsula's Russians, Tatars and other minorities – became part and parcel of the post-Soviet Ukrainian society and political nation.²

In 2014, the Kremlin tried to counteract, through its annexation operation, these basic natural and historical conditions of Crimea's existence within Ukraine, but Moscow could not annul them then and cannot do so now. With its capture of the peninsula, Russia went against the grain of some basic geographic, political, economic and cultural facts that have not just shaped Crimea's past. These fundamental circumstances are still present today and will frame the future of the peninsula.

The Continuing Isolation Problem

A fourth challenge for a Crimea that continues to be occupied by Russia is that not only the annexation itself, but also its international after-effects have increased and will increase the

1 Alina Cherviatsova, "The 1954 Transfer of Crimea: Debunking the Myth of a 'Royal Gift' to Ukraine," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 6:2 (2020): 183-212.

2 Eleanor Knott, *Kin Majorities: Identity and Citizenship in Crimea and Moldova* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2022).

peninsula's economic and political precariousness. Crimea is now a heavily sanctioned and internationally isolated region. It has been cut off from foreign trade and investment since 2014, from almost all non-Russian tourism, as well as from worldwide cultural and scientific exchange.

Not acknowledged as Russian territory by most countries of the world, Crimea legally remains Ukrainian land – whoever controls it politically. It has not lost its specific status as an occupied rather than properly Russian region. In that condition, for the past nine years, the peninsula has developed – even compared to Russia itself – an increasingly depressive and repressive political, social and cultural life.

Between late February 2014 and late February 2022, Crimea was in a security-political no man's land between the Russian Federation and mainland Ukraine. Russia's 2022 military capture and subsequent annexation of Ukraine's south-eastern dryland territory was meant to resolve Crimea's post-2014 strategic issues. Despite these intentions, the newly occupied parts of the Ukrainian regions Kherson and Zaporizhzhia have thus far not provided, however, a safe transportation corridor or strong connection from Russia to Crimea. War has been raging in Ukraine's newly Russia-annexed areas since the start of the full-scale invasion.

In fact, as of the late spring of 2023, it appears that the Kremlin's plan to meaningfully link Crimea to Russia through the 2022 annexations may never materialize, either now or in any future scenario. Even in the unlikely case that Moscow continues to control Ukraine's south-eastern mainland, the degree of precariousness of Crimea's geopolitical location will be maintained. When Ukraine militarily liberates or otherwise reacquires its dryland territories north of the occupied peninsula, the fragility of Crimea's isolated strategic position between 2014 and 2022 will grow further, in substance, and become increasingly salient, in political terms. The Kremlin will be thrown back to square one in its efforts to integrate the annexed peninsula into the Russian Federation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Alleviating Crimea's geo-economic position within the *Novorossia* (New Russia) project was not the most important driver, but a relevant contributing factor behind Moscow's 2022 escalation. By making the peninsula one of five annexed and interconnected Ukrainian regions, the Kremlin aimed to reduce Crimea's geographic isolation, economic unsustainability and military vulnerability as a Russian exclave since 2014. The 2022 deep invasion into mainland southern Ukraine was, among other aims, designed to improve the peninsula's infrastructural and political condition within a militarily expanded Russian Federation.

To be sure, the recent official annexation of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts was not only illegal, but also an embarrassing operation for Russia, in so far as Moscow does not fully control any of these four regions. It did not help Moscow to reacquire control over all of Ukraine, but instead mobilized Ukrainian resistance.

Nonetheless, it represented, from a Russian irredentist perspective, a partial fulfilment of the *Novorossia* dream and a sensible plan of action. The 2022 annexation was meant to resolve the problem of Crimea's fragile geopolitical and geo-economic position as well as to secure it as a supposedly Russian region. For now, this aim has been, to a certain degree, been achieved.

At the same time, however, the annexations of 2022 have created a dilemma for even a partial resolution of the Russian-Ukrainian territorial conflict. Russia's annexation of five regions of Ukraine is now not just a strategic headache for well-meaning Western observers. It has also generated a fundamental domestic problem for the doves in Moscow's political and intellectual establishment.

Not only have Russia's neo-imperial acquisition of mainland Ukrainian regions and its embarrassing military performance not resolved the issue of sustaining the annexed peninsula. Recognition of Crimea as a Russian territory continues to reach deep into Russian mainstream society – a fact also well-known outside Russia. By contrast, Russian popular appetite for mainland Ukrainian territories – whether in Ukraine's south or elsewhere – is much lower.

A potential return of the Ukrainian dryland regions annexed in 2022 through Western-assisted Ukrainian diplomatic and military efforts might be acceptable to the Russian population at some point in the future. Moreover, the regime might be able to stomach this humiliation without too much loss of legitimacy. However, without control of Ukraine's mainland territories north of the Black Sea, Moscow would again face, to their full extent, the above four strategic issues of a Russia-occupied Crimean exclave.

From Kyiv's point of view, the imperatives are clear. A continued Russian military presence in Crimea will remain a serious military threat to mainland Ukraine, the defence of which will be made much more difficult. For Ukraine to be credibly able to defend itself after any possible ceasefire deal, the Russian military threat from Crimea must be eliminated. Furthermore, a continued Russian military presence will severely complicate a credible defence of other non-Russian Black Sea area. Moscow could effectively seal off the Black Sea using anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) tactics. In sum, the various military-strategic dimensions of Crimea's location make the peninsula's fate a central issue for any efforts to diminish a future Russian military threat not only to Ukraine, but to the entire Black Sea region.

The still popular compartmentalization strategy of dividing the aim of liberating the now occupied Ukrainian mainland territories from the target of a return of Crimea to Kyiv's control is therefore not a road to sustainable security and stability. It would not only be highly unsatisfactory for most Ukrainians, but also merely re-establish for Moscow the challenging situation on annexed Crimea that co-motivated the 2022 invasion in the first place. Integration of the occupied peninsula into the Russian state and economy would again become, as was the case in 2014–2022, a more costly and uncertain undertaking than it is now.

Through its various recent annexations of Ukrainian territory, Moscow has locked itself into an inflexible geostrategic position. Sooner or later, the Kremlin might need a ceasefire, if not a stable peace, for economic reasons. However, Russia's national mythology now includes Crimea firmly in the Russian people's imagined core territory. This makes not only a rapprochement between Moscow and Kyiv difficult. It is also an issue that cannot seriously be separated from the fate of the recently annexed Ukrainian mainland territories. This is in spite of the fact that these four dryland regions are, in and of themselves, of much lesser salience to Russian mainstream nationalism.

As a result, it is now all or nothing for the Kremlin with regard to its territorial acquisitions of 2014 and 2022. The Kremlin needs Crimea to uphold the regime's legitimacy and popularity. However, Russia-occupied Crimea needs the Ukrainian drylands to its north to become

a more or less self-sustaining occupied, Russia-integrated, and, for Moscow, defensible region.

Western proposals to compartmentalize the aims of returning the currently occupied Ukrainian mainland territories to Kyiv's control, on the one hand, and not or only later reversing the 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, on the other, may mean well. However, they misdirect Western policies away from achieving a sustainable solution to the conflict and will lead to a permanent quagmire. They ignore the above-mentioned strategic barriers to implementing such a plan to achieve a lasting peace.

In turn, a negotiated return of the Black Sea peninsula to Ukraine's jurisdiction and reestablishment of Kyiv's political control over Crimea also appear impossible. The significance of Crimea to Russian nationalist mythology is too high. At least under its current leadership, if not beyond, Russia will stick to its 2014 capture of Crimea to the end. Kyiv can therefore only hope to set free the occupied mainland together with the peninsula through armed liberation or strong military and economic pressure on the Russian troops stationed in an isolated Crimea. The West should – for the above and other reasons – support Kyiv to achieve this aim with all possible means including, among other things, long-range missiles and fighter jets.

Epilogue

After completion of this report in May 2023, Russian occupying troops either intentionally or accidentally destroyed the Kakhovka Dam on the Dnipro River, on 6 June 2023. Whether the resulting large flood had been intended by Moscow to this degree or not, the deluge has had devastating effects on Ukraine's south-eastern mainland. It also violated the letter of a protocol added to the Geneva Convention in 1977 and forbidding water dams' destruction for military purposes because of the high collateral risks for civilians.

The depletion of the Kakhovka Reservoir also means that, apart from other irrigation canals, the until then partly operating North Crimean Canal has become fully dysfunctional again. This result of Russia's act of mass terror at Kakhovka may superficially be seen to run counter to the above argument. It seems indicate an only limited importance of Russian control over Ukraine's mainland territories to the north of Crimea for a continuation of Moscow's illegal occupation of the peninsula.

However, the Crimean purposes of Russia's 2022 large-scale invasion were only some of several and perhaps not the most important drivers of the escalation, in the first place. The aim of capturing Crimea was and is subordinate to the Kremlin's intention to subdue Ukraine as a whole. Moreover, one should not overestimate the rationality and consistency of Russian military strategy and decision making. Sometimes, the left hand may not know what a right hand is doing.

There may have been, in early summer 2023, also new Russian political calculations behind putting the North Crimean Canal out of operation. Russia's mass terrorist attack on the Kakhovka Dam – if it was indeed intended to have the effects it eventually had – may have been due to the novel situation at that point. Perhaps, by early June 2023, Moscow had come to the conclusion that Crimea was indefensible.



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