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Russia's Crimean Annexation: What it Means for East Asia

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Synopsis

Moscow's annexation of Crimea and continuing tensions over Ukraine have global ramifications extending to East Asia.

Commentary

MOSCOW'S ANNEXATION of Crimea and continuing tensions over Ukraine are being felt primarily as a crisis in European and United States relations with Russia. Yet Russia's challenge to the international order has global ramifications that extend to East Asia. Implications for the region can be understood in terms of three broad categories: demonstration, distraction and disruption.

Some of Moscow's East Asian neighbours may be concerned about the direct threat that a revived, recidivist Russia could turn its focus towards them. The reality, however, is that Moscow is more concerned with maintaining its territory east of the Urals than expansionist adventures. Russia's Far Eastern demographic decline is especially pronounced, while its borders are largely fixed.

Demonstration

The 'demonstration' value of Russia's recent actions, although indirect and contingent, carries more serious implications for East Asia. China is not the only relevant regional audience, but it is the most important given Beijing's prickly relations with the West, its budding partnership with Moscow and rising territorial tensions with other Asian neighbours.

With the UN Security Council immobilised by Russia's permanent veto, Moscow has shown, firstly, that it can use undeclared military force against a neighbouring state with virtual impunity, in open defiance of past treaty commitments and Western protests. Secondly, the 16 March 2014 referendum in Crimea and its rapid incorporation into the Russian Federation presented the West with a *fait accompli* "land grab" that poses fundamental challenges to the international order.

Irrespective of the exceptionalist arguments used to justify its actions in Crimea, Russia has set a disturbing precedent that goes well beyond the narrower objectives of its 2008 conflict with Georgia. Given the overlap of territorial disputes and diaspora populations across North and Southeast Asia, loose parallels could be drawn in order to justify similar strong-arm tactics.

From an operational viewpoint, Russia's success at gaining control of Crimea quickly and almost bloodlessly reflected four unusual advantages: the presence of pre-positioned forces in military bases; deep local knowledge; substantial popular support; and confusion faced by the new authorities in Kiev. Crimea is therefore not an easily transposable template for forcible takeovers.

Yet a territorial *fait accompli* on this scale inevitably commands demonstration value. China's *Global Times*, for example, drew the lesson that "It is not the ballots of Crimean residents that decide the fate of this region, it is Russia's warships, jet fighters and missiles", prompting the wider conclusion that "in the whole field of international politics (p)ower struggles instead of referendums are the decisive element".

The *Global Times* is not a proxy for China's official thinking; the tenor of China's interventions at the UN was more equivocal, stressing the importance of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Nonetheless, those advocating a harder line on maritime territorial claims may conclude that the Crimean crisis presents both a precedent and a window of opportunity to press China's sovereignty claims harder, especially in the South China Sea where Beijing is currently subjecting the Philippines to coercive tactics.

The takeover of Crimea has imposed tangible international costs on Russia, in the form of dented economic confidence as well as targeted sanctions imposed by the West. But in his 17 March 2014 Kremlin speech, President Vladimir Putin essentially claimed victory in his own terms, invoking the recovery of "historically Russian land" and protecting compatriots in the former Soviet diaspora.

Putin's Crimean gambit is not universally supported in Russia, as revealed by a rare anti-government demonstration in Moscow. But the Russian president has unquestionably received a boost to his domestic standing. Putin's emotive framing of Russia's intervention in Crimea as standing up to Western "hypocrisy" and "aggression" will resonate in China and beyond.

Distraction

The second area of fallout concerns the risk of prolonged distraction, as Western countries devote more political resources to deal with the ongoing crisis over Ukraine. For the European Union, Russia's proximity ensures that it will divert attention that could otherwise be devoted to East Asia, stymieing Brussels' efforts to diversify its narrowly economic regional profile. For the US, a crisis in US-Russia relations is yet another problem added to a burgeoning global list of distractions from the intended 'rebalance' to Asia.

The more acute risk of distraction, however, links back to the demonstration value of Russia's actions in Crimea, namely the perception that a window of opportunity has been opened by Russia's actions, within which miniature "land-grabs" can be attempted in the South China Sea at reduced cost.

Disruption

Distraction aside, there is the diplomatic fallout to consider, including implications for China's partnership with Russia under President Xi Jinping. Beijing abstained from the 15 March 2014 UN Security Council resolution criticising the upcoming referendum in Crimea. However, Russia's permanent veto is likely to spare Beijing's further blushes at the UN. Fallout could nonetheless spread to US-China relations if Washington and Brussels press hard for punitive action against Moscow outside the UN.

In his Kremlin speech, Putin was careful to thank China for its diplomatic support over Crimea, appealing to common anti-Western sentiments with the aim of sharpening China's choices. If Beijing elects to prioritise solidarity with Moscow over its relations with the EU and Washington, the resulting alignment could take on more than short-term significance. Cooperation with Russia is also important for China's plans to leverage economic connectivity with Central Asian states. Beijing will not want to jeopardise this.

For Japan, Crimea has already had a disruptive impact. Early on in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's second term Russia was identified as a priority country for enhanced cooperation, Moscow being one of his earliest visits. After a slow start, Japan-Russia cooperation appeared to be yielding progress across a broad front. However, Japan, also feeling the weight of US pressure, has refused to recognise the Crimean referendum and frozen progress on a new investment agreement, cooperation in outer space, and an accord for preventing dangerous military activities.

Diplomatic disruption could extend beyond the key bilateral ties to Russia's expanded interface with East Asia's multilateral architecture, including membership of the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus). Russia, sharing a land border with North Korea, also has a seat at the semi-defunct Six Party Talks. Moscow's role in these forums remains essentially peripheral, though its continuing

participation alongside the US could prove tricky to isolate from tensions over Ukraine.

Asian countries' appetite for dealing with Moscow as a long-term energy supplier could wane in the aftermath of Crimea's annexation, as it is doing in Europe. Increased political risk associated with Russia could weigh on Northeast Asia's commercial interest in Arctic shipping routes. Moscow will have to work harder to persuade Asian partners that it is business as usual, even as the region becomes more important to Russia economically.

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