

## **Russia's annexation of Crimea and its implications for East Asia: a Russian perspective** by Konstantin Sarkisov

*Konstantin Sarkisov ([sarkisovko@yahoo.com](mailto:sarkisovko@yahoo.com)) is Professor Emeritus at Yamanashi Gakuin University in Japan.*

Concerns about Crimea's implications for Asian geopolitics are fair, provided that Asian countries strongly believe that the principle of non-violation of a nation's integrity is "sacred" and they consistently abide by it. Reality is more complicated, however. Despite being "sacred," this principle has been violated many times, usually justified by circumstances. In Kosovo, for instance, it was "justified" by the killing of thousands of people.

Should Russia have waited for the same to occur in Crimea? Every case has its own justification and the final verdict depends on who is the "perpetrator" and who is the "judge." I am not a fan of Putin, but I should admit that his actions were not prompted by his or most Russians' dream to get back an "old gem" of the Tsar's Crown. Again, as a Russian, I can testify that the Crimean Peninsula lived in our hearts but not in our minds. Most Russians were sure that it was lost forever and there was no way to hoist the Russian flag on the peninsula again.

It all happened suddenly. Hundreds of burning tires on TV screens, classic pictures from a revolutionary coup, as well as the speeches of new Ukrainian leaders who, as in medieval times, were appointed by the approval of the crowd (though many of them were decent people absolutely right to overthrow a decayed regime).

Putin is very pragmatic and the ideology of nationalism is not his strong point. Though he addresses it from time to time, he is a pragmatist and he knows and even sometimes admits that behind the "Great Russia" slogan there is not much substance, save for great territory, a classic culture, and nuclear weapons.

My sense is that he made a dramatic decision prompted by despair rather than by ambition, courage, or resolve: in other words he was driven into a corner. His concern was simple: who could he rely upon to ensure that the coup didn't change Ukraine into an anti-Russian entity with NATO fighters coming to Kiev and Kharkov's airfields as they are now doing in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. Who could keep Sebastopol Navy port from being transformed into a NATO base hosting a US 6th Fleet aircraft carrier and warships of another NATO member – Turkey – taking Russia 300 years back in time?

Could he appeal to Europeans? You must be kidding! They hated him (the reasons why are not relevant since geopolitics and the balance of power are at stake) and weeks before the Ukraine crisis no European leader came to the Sochi Olympics Opening Ceremony in objection to his gay-

rights agenda. Could he appeal to the new Ukraine authority? That question is funnier still. They were and are furiously anti-Russian. That may be emotional, but emotions shape strategic decisions.

Putin made a "blatant" excursion to Crimea fully aware that it will cost him much. The time was not good. The Russian economy is still in a "transitional period" and is moving at a very slow pace. A huge reliance on energy exports (70 percent of all exports) made this "endeavor" more risky still. His appeal to the right of self-determination of nations was not only hopeless but controversial, since the principle of territorial integrity is much more needed by multinational Russia itself.

And finally, defending "Russian speaking people" was important but not his main objective, as is made plain by Putin's claim that he will not go further into the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine, home to 9 million Russians. Now he is apparently eager to reconcile with Europeans and Americans. His urgent call to Obama in Riyadh (not even waiting for him to return to Washington) makes this point well. Once afraid to lose all of Ukraine, he now seems satisfied by holding a bit of it.

One should be more concerned about the general shift in the global geopolitical situation if Russia, isolated in Europe, even partially, moves to the East. For many years and many reasons, this used to be a very attractive agenda for Russia. Economically Asia is a growing market and Russia's main resources are located in Siberia and the Far East. The lack of population, and poor industrial and social infrastructure, as well as other problems, could be solved by this shift. It is not easy to refocus national priorities but it is desirable and as a national priority it was formulated before the current crisis.

Russia's geopolitical shift will have a significant impact. Despite the slow pace of its economy, it is still number 8 in terms of nominal GDP (according to the UN, IMF, World Bank, and CIA). Russia is number 6 in world GDP when calculated by PPP. Squeezed by pressure from Europe and the US, Moscow would accelerate its move to Asia, using China and India as the linchpins of its new diplomacy. Unfortunately for Russia, Japan is not on the list. That is not just because of the Northern Territories but because of Tokyo's dependence on the US in foreign policy. If pushed by the Obama administration, it will be more difficult for Abe to offer an invitation to Putin to visit Tokyo this autumn than to visit once again Yasukuni Shrine.

Every dispute over territory has its own background and peculiarities. When considering the conflicts in Asia similar to Crimea, East Pakistan and East Timor come to mind, but they are old. Disputes like China-Taiwan, South-North Korea are different by nature. Closer still are the cases of minorities like the Rohingya on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border or the

Karen who straddle the border between Thailand and Myanmar, or Thailand's problem with the Malaysian population on Kra Isthmus.

The core of all conflicts, flaring and smoldering, is that 25 years after the end of the Cold War, the world is still deeply divided. It consists of blocs and alliances. Inside a block conflicts can be managed between "national interests"; in the EU, the most notorious territorial disputes are dampened by an actual absence of borders.

But Russia is outside any bloc or alliance. Putin during his first term championed the idea of a "Common European House." There was an attempt to join the EU and even NATO. Recall it was Russia that pushed talks to abandon visas between Russia and the rest of Europe. Putin several times proposed this while visiting Washington. But each of those Russian bids was rejected for reasonable motives but mostly due to anti-Russian prejudice that bordered on paranoia.

A "zero-sum" mentality in regional and global politics prevails. The "hard disc" of international space is formatted by nation-state clusters. Lessons for Asia are obvious – rather than stiffen confrontational features to help potentially vulnerable countries avoid a "Crimea syndrome" in Asia, think of what can be done to avoid the clash of "national interests."

What can overcome egocentric nation-state behavior? Common threats or interests. Engagement in multinational bodies like regional communities can provide greater authority to make international law "sacred." Putting more life and sovereignty in international bodies, which will enable them to bring adversaries to the table for a compromise based on international law can eliminate double-standards. After all, the EU was designed to avoid the inevitability of a clash between German, France, and British national interests.

What can serve the same function in East Asia? Unfortunately progressivism doesn't work in international relations. The Tokyo-based Institute for International Policy Studies proposed the concept of an East Asia Community with 19 members including Washington and Moscow; it is now the subject of ironical comments. Instead, the TPP is on its way.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*