



## **THE CRIMEAN REFERENDUM: SETTING THE STAGE FOR RESTORATION OF RUSSIA'S LOST GLORY**

*Chandra Rekha  
Research Associate, CAPS*

The recent showdown and overwhelming majority vote by Crimea in favour of accession to Russia has once again brought the region to a critical juncture in international affairs. Crimea is surrounded by the Black Sea and connected to the Ukrainian mainland by the narrow Isthmus of Perekop. It also rests about 200 miles (322 km) northwest of Sochi. The geographical proximity of Crimea makes it a desirable geo-political trophy as was seen during the Crimean war- one of the epic battles that changed the history of the world and reshaped Europe's power structure. 'In 1954, the territory became part of Ukraine during the Soviet rule until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then it remained as a semi-autonomous region of Ukraine. Crimea had its own legislative body — the 100-member Supreme Council of Crimea — and executive power was held by a Council of Ministers, headed by a chairman who served with the approval of the president of Ukraine. The courts, however, were part of the judicial system of Ukraine and had no autonomous authority.'<sup>i</sup>

Crimea always has been of grave importance as it shares strong cultural ties with Russia. In fact, Russian ethnic majority comprises nearly 59% of the population. Russia's Black Sea naval fleet is based at Sevastopol and has been there for nearly 230 years and is the only important warm water port for Russia. 'Ships and submarines based there are just north of Turkey and can reach the Mediterranean to influence the Middle East and the Balkans'.<sup>ii</sup> This has also ensured Russia's naval control in Black Sea. 'When the Russians

annexed Crimea in 1783, they did so because of the enormous opportunity to project their power into the Black Sea region, and also because they could build warm-water naval bases. Nineteenth-century Odessa became a boom city, a Russian counterpart to San Francisco, and Sevastopol was a mighty naval fortress<sup>iii</sup>.

Moreover, Russia has been wary of EU initiatives in the Black Sea, and believed that policies such as the Eastern Partnership are an extension of the EU's sphere of influence in the region.<sup>iv</sup> These concerns over EU's intentions became stronger with the recent political mobilisation in Ukraine and Crimea and escalated further with the ousting of the pro-Russian Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovich. The crisis in the region started as protests over rejecting a planned EU trade deal in favour of Moscow. It sparked a month of street protests between pro- EU protesters and Russian supporters<sup>v</sup>. Crimea was the bastion of support to the ousted President Yanukovich. Several were killed and injured in the Kiev clashes. Russia viewed the ousting of the pro-Russian President as an attempt by the West and the EU to contain Russia from re- Sovietising its former republics.

Russia intervened in Crimea and tightened its grip in the peninsula during the clashes in Kiev. 'Russian-allied troops in Crimea took hold of key targets including airports, government offices and military bases and Russian military leaders demanded the complete surrender of all Ukrainian forces in Crimea'.<sup>vi</sup>

On the other hand, Crimean parliament voted in favour of joining the Russian Federation followed by the referendum on 17 March. Nearly 97% vote supported accession to Moscow. 'The declaration of the referendum not only approved Crimea to formally join Russia but also adopt Russian Rouble as its currency within a month. Crimea will move to

#### ARTICLES BY SAME AUTHOR

RELEVANCE OF INS  
VIKRAMADITYA IN  
SECURITY PERSPECTIVE OF  
INDIA

JIMEX IN THE WAKE OF  
CHINA'S INROADS INTO  
INDIAN OCEAN REGION

SOCHI WINTER OLYMPICS:  
IN THE SHADOW OF  
TERROR

Moscow time (GMT+4 and two hours ahead of Kiev time) on March 30. This also offered the Crimean army join Russian military'. It also moved quickly to nationalize state property and two major energy companies- Chornomornaftohaz and Ukrtransgaz, and set up a new central bank with millions of Russian dollars<sup>vii</sup>.

**T**he joining of Crimea has further bolstered President Putin's vision of a new international organisation- the Eurasian Union in 2015 linking Russia with an as-yet-undetermined constellation of its neighbouring countries. 'Currently, only two nations besides Russia, Belarus and Kazakstan, have signed on. A number of other post-Soviet states, including Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, have signalled interest in joining. The organisation is expected to build on an existing regional trade pact to establish common policies on labour migration, investment, trade, and energy. Ukraine also has been key factor to Putin's vision for the Eurasian Union with its steel mills, coal plants, bountiful agricultural resources, and massive population of 46 million people. Hence Ukraine would provide the necessary anchor—of any successful version of the Eurasian Union'.<sup>viii</sup> Joining of Crimea with Russia will also address the growing demographic crisis of Russia and enumerate its military strength with the addition of almost 2 million population of Crimea.

**H**owever, one of the negative impacts of the sabre-rattling between Russia and Ukraine has been the violation of the Russian commitment to respect Ukraine's borders and independence. Russia has vowed to provide these security guarantees in exchange for Ukraine's dismantling of the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal.

**T**he showdown in Crimea will reassert Russia's emerging global status. It is perceived in Russia as a restoration of lost glory after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It has however given rise to several questions as to whether Russia is capable of investing in Crimea's economic aspirations especially with Russia still grappling with its own economy. Crimea is not just home to Russian ethnics but also to ethnic Ukrainian and Muslim Tartars who are still fearful of a revival of the persecution they suffered for centuries during the Soviet rule. This can act as a catalyst to ethnic clashes. With Crimea voting in favour of joining the Russian Federation, it is important to evaluate the position of U.S and European

Union vis a vis the growing Russian influence in former Soviet Republics. The situation will be worth monitoring.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)*

-----XXX-----

<sup>i</sup> Marc Lallanilla, "5 Key Facts About Crimea", 3 March, 2014, <http://www.livescience.com/43815-facts-about-crimea-ukraine-russia.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Richard Allen Greene, "Ukraine's Crimea Lives in Russia's Shadow: 5 Things to Know". February 28, 2014. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/27/world/europe/ukraine-crimea-5-things/>

<sup>iii</sup> Askold Krushelnycky, "Democracy Lab: Crimea's War of Nerves", 4 March, 2014, [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/04](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/04)

<sup>iv</sup> Mustafa Aydın-Sinem A. Açıkmeşe, "EU Engagement in the Black Sea: The Views from the Region", Centre for European Strategy. Warsaw, 2011. Pg. 10

<sup>v</sup> "Ukraine Crisis: EU and US Impose Sanctions over Crimea", 17 March 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26613567>

<sup>vi</sup> Lallanilla, 03 March, 2014. <http://www.livescience.com/43815-facts-about-crimea-ukraine-russia.html>

<sup>vii</sup> "After Secession Vote, Crimea Moves in on Energy Companies, Banking, Land", 17 March 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2014/03/17/crimea-official-says-66-percent-voters-support-joining-russia/>

<sup>viii</sup> Leon Neyfakh, "Putin's Long Game? Meet the Eurasian Union", 9 March, 2014. <http://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2014/03/09/putin-long-game-meet-eurasian-union/>