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Crisis in Ukraine: Russia Extends its Control over the Black Sea and Strategic Waterways

By Prof Michel Chossudovsky

March 18, 2014

The decision of Crimea to join the Russian Federation has strategic and geopolitical implications.

The union of Crimea with Russia redefines both the geography as well as the geopolitical chessboard in the Black Sea basin.

It constitutes a major setback for US-NATO, whose longstanding objective has been to integrate Ukraine into NATO with a view to undermining Russia, while extending Western military presence in the Black Sea basin.

With the March 18, 2014 Treaty signed between Russia and Crimea, the Russian Federation will extend its control over the Black Sea as well over the Sea of Azov, the West coastline of which borders on Eastern Ukraine and the Donesk region. (see map below)

Under the agreement between Russia and Crimea announced by president Putin, two "constituent regions" of Crimea will join the Russian Federation: the "Republic of Crimea" and the "City of Sevastopol". Both will have the status of "autonomous regions".

The status of Sevastopol as an autonomous entity separate from Crimea is related to the location of Russia's Naval base in Sevastopol.

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia retained its naval base in Sevastopol under a bilateral agreement with Ukraine. With the signing of the March 18th Treaty, that agreement is null and void. Sevastopol including the Russian naval base become part of an autonomous region within the Russian Federation. The naval base is no within Ukraine under a lease agreement. Moreover, Crimea's territorial waters now belong to the Russian Federation.

Strategic Waterway: The Kerch Straits

Russia now formally controls a much larger portion of the Black Sea, which includes the entire coastline of the Crimean peninsula. The Eastern part of Crimea –including the Kerch straits– are now under Russia's jurisdiction control. On the Eastern side of the Kerch straits is Russia's Krasnodar region and extending southwards are the port cities of Novorossiysk and Sochi.

Novorossiysk is also strategic. It is Russia's largest commercial port on the Black Sea, at the cross-roads of major oil and gas pipelines between the Black Sea and Caspian sea.

Historically, the Kerch straits have played a strategic role. They constitute a gateway from the Black Sea to Russia's major waterways including the Don and the Volga.

During World War II, the Kerch peninsula occupied by Nazi Germany (taken back by the Red Army) was an important point of transit by land and water. In the coldest months of Winter, it became an ice bridge linking Crimea to the Krasnodar region.

The Kerch straits are about 5 kilometers in length and 4.5 km. wide at the narrowest point between the tip of Eastern Crimea and the peninsula of Taman. Kerch is a major commercial port linked to railway, ferry and river routes.

The Sea of Azov: New Geopolitical Hub

Of significance, the integration of Crimea into the Russian Federation means that Moscow is now in full control of the Kerch Straits linking the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. The Ukrainian authorities are no longer in control of the port of Kerch. The bilateral agreement between Russia and Ukraine governing the maritime route through the Kerch straights has been scrapped.

The straits constitute an entry point into Russia's major river waterways. The Sea of Azov connects with the Don River and the Volga, through the Volga Don Canal. In turn, the Volga flows into the Caspian sea.

The Kerch straits are strategic. The Kerch-Yenikalskiy Canal allows large (ocean) vessels to transit from the Black sea to the Sea of Azov.

Moreoever, the Kerch Straits link the Black Sea to the Volga which in turn connects to the Moscow river through the Volga-Moskva canal.

Full control of the narrow Kerch straits by Russia ensures unimpeded maritime transit from the Black Sea to Russia's capital as well as the maritime route to the Caspian Sea. (Black Sea- Sea of Azov -Don- Volga Don Canal -Volga -Caspian Sea)

In December 2013 Moscow signed a bilateral agreement with the Yanukovych government in Kiev pertaining to the construction of a bridge across the Kerch Straits, connecting Eastern Crimea (which was part of Ukraine) with Russia's Krasnodar region. This agreement was a followup to an initial agreement signed in April 2010 between the two governments.

The Russia-Ukraine 2013 agreement pertaining to the construction of the bridge had, for all purposes already been scrapped before March 16. Crimea's union to Russia was already in the pipeline prior to the referendum, it was a *fait accompli*. Less than two weeks before the March 16 Referendum, at the height of the crisis in Ukraine, Russia's Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev ordered the state-road building corporation Avtodor, or "Russian Highways" "to create a subsidiary company that will oversee the building of a bridge across the Kerch Strait".

This bridge would largely be geared towards train transport routes linking Western and Eastern Europe to the Caspian Sea basin, Kazakhstan and China. It is therefore an integral part of Eurasian Project.

Needless to say, the Kerchen bridge project will be fully under Russian ownership and control. The Kerchen straits are within Russian territorial waters on both sides of the straits.

The Sea of Azov, Eastern Ukraine and the Donbas Region

The Eastern Ukraine and the densely populated Donetz basin (Donbas region) of Ukraine -in which the Russian population constitutes a majority– borders on the Western coastline of the Sea of Azov, which is now in large part under Russian control.

LINGUISTIC DIVISION IN UKRAINE

PERCENTAGE OF RUSSIAN-SPEAKERS
0-10%
10-20%
20-40%
40-60%
60-100%
Kiev: 30%
Sevastopol: 90%

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"Ripple Effect" of the Crimean Referendum. How will the Crisis Evolve?

Will the referendum in Crimea set the stage for the integration of part of Eastern and Southern Ukraine into the Russian Federation?

Will it backlash on the illegitimate government in Kiev?

The geographic and geopolitical changes pertaining to Crimea, the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov have a direct bearing on unfolding events in Eastern Ukraine.

Throughout Eastern Ukraine as well as in Odessa in southern Ukraine, the legitimacy of the interim neo-Nazi government in Kiev has been questioned. Municipal and local levels citizens' committees are challenging the authority of Kiev appointed officials.

In the port city of Odessa on the Black Sea, a protest movement demanding a referendum has unfolded. The referendum, however, does not focus on a union with Russia. It is to unseat the US-EU sponsored government in Kiev, which is considered illegal. It also challenges the adoption by the new government of the neoliberal economic reforms, which are slated to be adopted under the helm of the IMF.

Thousands held a Pro-Russian rally in support of Crimea's referendum in Odessa, despite calls from the city's authorities not to participate in meetings. Organizers claim more than 5,000 people joined the demonstration.

"Odessa is against the coup in Kiev, paid for by the West and Ukrainian oligarchs who remained in power with the help deceitful extremists and militants. We are tired of living in poverty and we are no longer going to tolerate the tyranny of oligarchs and officials," ….

The people were chanting *"Ukraine and Russia – one country,"* and *"Odessa, be bold, drive the fascists out,"* as they gathered in the center of the city. (RT, March 16, 2014)

Reported by RT, protests have developed in Kharkov and Donetsk demanding the holding of a referendum on the federalization of Ukraine:

Protesters, on behalf of Kharkov's assembly, asked Putin to "*guarantee their rights and freedoms*" and pass to the United Nations their demands **regarding a referendum on the federalization,** which they plan for April 27, reported Ukrainian National News (UNN) website. Additionally, activists asked to deploy Russian peacekeepers to Kharkov region, adding that they fear for their lives and property.

The demonstrators then marched to the nearby consulate of Poland, protesting against Western interference into Ukrainian affairs.

Kharkov protesters also looted the building housing offices of radical-nationalist organizations, including the Right Sector group, reported Interfax-Ukraine. The activists broke into the building, took out books and nationalist symbols and burnt them.

Pro-Russian activists hold giant Russian flags during their rally in the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk on March 16, 2014.

In Donetsk, pro-Russian protesters questioned the legitimacy of the interim coalition government:

Meanwhile, Kiev sent heavy military hardware to the borders with Russia. Activists in eastern Ukraine regions, including Donetsk and Lugansk, were reportedly blocking trains delivering military equipment from the central and western parts of Ukraine.

Similar rallies were held in Dnepropetrovsk and Lugansk.

In Lugansk the campaign focused on a 'people's referendum' directed against the Kiev interim government:

In Lugansk, several thousand anti-coup activists were conducting a public poll by handing out "ballot papers" of "people's referendum" of Lugansk region. The poll raised questions of trust in

the authorities in Kiev, the possibility of joining the Customs Union following the federalization of Ukraine.

One of the questions was about the international bailout: *"Do you support reduction of social benefits and cancellation of benefits at the request of the IMF?"*

"This is for all an opportunity to officially announce their choice. Now we have run out of 5,000 forms, we are rushing to print more," organizer Irina Gotman told UNIAN. (RT, op cit)