



What Crimea Teaches Central Asia

May 26, 2014 **Stephen Blank** *The Diplomat*

Related Categories: Russia; Ukraine

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has called Russia's invasion, occupation and annexation of the Crimean peninsula, along with its incitement of a civil war in Eastern Ukraine, a game-changer. One region where this description could possess particular resonance is Central Asia. All Central Asian governments have considerable reasons for alarm in the wake of Russia's actions and the supine Western response. In this context, Vladimir Putin's speech to the Duma of March 18, 2014 represented a landmine under the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all five Central Asian states with the threat of Russian military action should they somehow threaten the dignity and honor of Russians who are citizens in their states.

Subsequent Russian legislation on citizenship essentially then made all these ethnic Russians eligible for citizenship in Moscow to justify such intervention, and thus evoked one of the most obnoxious aspects of colonialism: the idea of extra-territoriality. This is, in other words, the idea that citizens in one country could enjoy the protection of a stronger country as its citizens and thus escape the legal authority of the state where they resided, while possibly becoming justifications for military intervention there. Putin's subsequent demand for self-determination for Russians, made in Crimea on May 9, exacerbated this threat to the sovereignty and integrity of these states.

Russian legislation from 2009 already permits the Russian president to send the Russian military into these and other countries that threaten the "honor and dignity" of Russians residing in their country, without even seeking the Duma's assent. Therefore Russia can cook up a provocation based on alleged or even real mistreatment of Russians, and invade any of these states at will. And to judge from the equivocal Chinese and passive Western response, nobody will come to their aid. Neither is this first such threat. Kazakh diplomats long ago reported that Russian officials habitually tell them that they must keep to Moscow's line on various policies because they have a large Russian minority and Russia could make serious trouble for Kazakhstan if it moves away from Moscow's line.

Similarly, in 2011 Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry blasted Russia's objections to it participating in a Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline, noting that the pipeline was vital to Turkmenistan's economic interests. The ministry went on to rebuke Moscow for "distorting the essence and gist of Turkmenistan's energy policy." It announced that discussions with Europe over this pipeline would continue.

Moscow's reply was swift. On November 15, 2011 Valery Yazev, Vice-Speaker of the Russian Duma and head of the Russian Gas Society, threatened Turkmenistan with the Russian incitement of an "Arab Spring" if it did not renounce its "neutrality" and independent sovereign foreign policy. Yazev said that, "Given the instructive experience with UN resolutions on Libya and the political consequences of their being 'shielded from the air' by NATO forces, Turkmenistan will soon understand that only the principled positions of Russia and China in the UN Security Council and its involvement in regional international organizations – such as the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization), Eurasian Economic Union – can protect it from similar resolutions."

In other words, Turkmenistan should surrender its neutrality and independent foreign policy and not ship gas to Europe otherwise Moscow will incite a revolution there leading to chaos. Other Russian analysts and officials threatened that if Turkmenistan adheres to the EU's planned Southern Corridor for energy trans-shipments to Europe that bypass Russia, Moscow would have no choice but to do to Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan what it did to Georgia in 2008. Mikhail Aleksandrov, a department chief of the state-sponsored Institute on the CIS not only made this particular threat; he also opined that NATO's Libya operation gave Moscow the right to use force in the Caspian Basin.

Moscow thus showed that it means businesses and is perfectly willing to use force to redraw Eurasian boundaries if so moved. And unlike 2008 when China supported Central Asian governments against Russia's annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in 2014 Beijing has refused to take a stand. Therefore all these governments publicly, if visibly reluctantly, accepted the outcome of the Russian-initiated referendum in Crimea. The equivocal formal responses of Central Asian states despite their visible distress are therefore quite understandable.

However, Kazakhstan, the most endangered state, has already begun to take steps to strengthen its defenses. The Kazakh government has now criminalized advocacy of separatism, begun a campaign to move Ethnic Kazakhs to northern Kazakhstan to dilute the concentration of Russian settlement there, has slowed agreement on the clauses of the treaty to establish Putin's showcase project of a Eurasian Customs Union, and reaffirmed its ties with the U.S. in discussions with Undersecretary of State William Burns. American analysts also believe that the Crimean affair will induce Kazakhstan's rival elites to resolve their differences so that the urgent issue of who will succeed the 74-year-old President Nursultan Nazarbayev is resolved in a unified way. The argument is that these elites now understand that any show of weakness, division, and dissension among elites that weakens the state opens the door and creates a pretext for Russian intervention. Similarly the equally unresolved Uzbek succession issue and the visible domestic tensions there may now be put aside by an Uzbek elite who can clearly recognize what its Kazakh alter ego has probably grasped, namely that weakness and discord invites Russian military pressure if not intervention and there is nobody to rescue Uzbekistan from Moscow.

The Central Asian implications of the Ukrainian crisis also show us that the United States still has no adequate Central Asian policy and cannot be counted on in a crisis. If it will not do anything robust for Ukraine, with whom it had a major agreement assuring Ukraine's integrity, what can and will Washington do for Central Asia, especially after it is withdrawing from Afghanistan? Undoubtedly Central Asian governments are pondering that question and as the EU downgrades its exposure in the region for its own reasons, its less than stellar response to Ukraine makes it look even more unreliable. Kipling and the Victorians are long gone but nobody should labor under the illusion that the Great Game has died or that Central Asia is a backwater of world affairs with which we do not have to be concerned. Indeed, given all the potential threats to its security, we should not be surprised if the next act of the drama that Putin began in Crimea takes place there.