

**CRIMEA - CHANGING HANDS BETWEEN  
HISTORY AND RUSSIA'S REALPOLITIK: A  
LOOK AT THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA  
ON ITS 10TH ANNIVERSARY**

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## Executive Summary

The rationale behind the 2014 annexation of Crimea is examined in this report, which provides a historical context and evaluates the theories offered by different schools of International Relations. Considering Crimea's historical strategic significance, particularly its pivotal geopolitical function with the growth of Russian imperial military power during the Tsar era, the report elucidates the ethnic and cultural complexities of Crimea while identifying its historical, political, cultural, and economic connections between Ukraine and Russia. Understanding the legal implications of Crimea's annexation to Ukraine and the accompanying rationales for its transfer to Ukraine in 1954 is significant in analyzing the identity of Crimea and its status under Russian influence. Crimea's seizure and its continued significance in Russia's geopolitical strategies has led to a renewed era of power rivalry in Europe, which may have incisive repercussions for the West and the United States and risk clashes with Russia, as they expand their influence in the region via the NATO alliance.

The simplest explanation is often the correct one. This is true in the case of the annexation of Crimea Peninsula 10 years ago on March 18, 2014. Absorbing Crimea into Russia's orbit generated a wide array of discussions in an attempt to understand the factors that led to the annexation of Crimea. Controversies abound regarding the correlation between IR theories and the ensuing Russian annexation of Crimea. With the unexpected becoming increasingly a norm in geopolitics, Russia's actions typically fit into one of the following explanations:

- Russia is pursuing a nationalist and combative rhetoric that mirrors domestic political dynamics at home (Liberal Views)
- Russia's foreign policy seeks greater Russian influence and bolstering the image of Russia's past greatness (Social identity views)
- Russian realpolitik and opportunistic behavior to seize Crimea for strategic purposes (structural realist views)

- The crisis roots in the nature of interactions between Europe, the United States, Russia, and Ukraine (Constructivist views)

Whether these explanations are grounded in realist, constructive, liberal, or other IR doctrines, one factor remains constant: the era of unipolar world order has ended. But what exactly prompted Russia to take Crimea from Ukraine? The most straightforward explanation points to the balance of threat: US and Western policymakers overlooked the possibility that their actions could be interpreted as a threat to Russian interests. Assessing Russia's annexation of Crimea would first require the study of the real issues at stake. Russia's seizure of Crimea is a fitting example to link its legitimate concerns in Europe, especially in the context of Ukraine's ambitious plan to join NATO alliance, which has long served as a backdoor to NATO influence. The annexation of Crimea is an improvised military response to a political crisis that stems from long-standing Russian concerns about the West's expanding hegemony within what it views as its own sphere of influence.

The primary distinction is that Russia is more concerned about political intrusion, economic pressure, and cultural influences than it is about military threats posed by NATO expansion along its borders. Stemming from its geopolitical importance throughout history, Crimea has been the centerstage of conflict and a strategic location for Russia to have direct access to the Black Sea and by extension, the Mediterranean Sea. The long history of Russian dominance over Crimea offers a clear explanation for the Peninsula's centuries-long history of changing hands and the ambiguities surrounding its national identity.



**Crimea From a Historical Standpoint:** Crimea has provided significant geo-strategic advantages since the days of the Tsardom of Russia from 1547 to 1721. Having become a symbol of Russian imperial military power, Crimea served as the site of major military bases against the Ottoman Empire. The ongoing power struggles in Eastern Europe led to a series of ethnic cleansing in the region:

- **In the 1700s:** Catherine the Great started a process of Russifying Ukraine and shipping in ethnic Russians to Crimea?
- **In the 1930s:** Joseph Stalin repopulated Crimea with ethnic Russians and relocated ethnic Tatars, who were the majority of Crimea's population.

These waves of ethnic Russian repopulation in Crimea were economically and politically motivated. Russia has had its eyes set on the east of Ukraine for a very long time, recognizing it as a center of natural resources, including iron and coal, as well as the most fertile farmlands on Earth. The national identity of Crimea, which is split between Russia and

Ukraine, lacks coherence, particularly when assessing the preferences of the population. **Historically, deep down Crimea is Russian**. Most Crimeans are ethnically Russian and have been under Russian rule for over 200 years. Before the seizure of Crimea in 2014, pro-Russian rallies took place during the month of February and in a poll that was conducted that same month, 41%<sup>1</sup> of Crimeans sided with efforts to rejoin Russia.

### **Box 1: Battle of Kozludzha and Annexation of Crimean Khanate**

The Throne of Crimea, known as Little Tartary in old European historiography, was a Crimean Tatar state existing between 1441-1783. The peninsula was considered an independent state according to the terms stipulated in the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, after the decisive battle of Kozludzha in the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774. Ottoman Empire's defeat forced a new reality on the Turks to cede sovereignty over the Khanate and allow it to be an independent state under Russian influence. In November 1776, the Russian Empire at the behest of Empress Catherine invaded Crimea, following the Ottoman Empire's intention to retake Crimea, given that the Khan of the Crimean throne had officially requested Crimea's reentry into the Ottoman Empire.

Drawing from the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774, Crimea established, under Russian influence, a political system where it was overseeing Crimean affairs under the title of Khan. The formal annexation of Crimea did not take place until 1783.<sup>2</sup> A succession of Tatar rebellions ensued in response to the hand-selected removal of Tatars from key political positions by the Khan. By that time, Crimea was already embroiled in a desperate struggle for power of competing clans. This forced the Russian Empire to send in troops to restore order, which added the benefit of establishing a Black Sea Port for use by the Empress, currently housing the Russian Black Sea Fleet. With that, 134 years of Russian rule

commenced marking the end of the Crimean slave trade, which was one of the major transit points for trading slaves from Europe for centuries. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Crimea was transferred to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) to be annexed later to Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UkrSSR) in 1954 through a resolution of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet.

## **Box 2: Count Alexander Bezborodko's Diary**

### **Collection of the Imperial Russian Historical Society**

*"The Porte has not kept good faith from the very beginning. Their primary goal has been to deprive the Crimeans of independence. They banished the legal khan and replaced him with the thief Devlet Giray. They consistently refused to evacuate the Taman. They made numerous perfidious attempts to introduce rebellion in the Crimea against the legitimate Khan Şahin Giray. All of these efforts did not bring us to declare war...The Porte never ceased to drink in each drop of revolt among the Tatars...Our only wish has been to bring peace to Crimea...and we were finally forced by the Turks to annex the area."*

**Evaluation:** Russia sympathizes with the classic Russian rhetorical position mentioned by Count Alexander to this day, which holds that Russia's intentions in the Peninsula are to protect its citizens and restore order. The perpetual Russian influence in Crimea throughout history serves as evidence that the peninsula has never been considered independent. After the Russo-Turkish Wars, the Ottomans had little control or role in the Crimean revolts before its annexation in 1783. The Ottoman Empire, having been defeated in the Russo-Turkish Wars, entered into the Treaty of Constantinople (1784), a formal treaty of transfer that acknowledged the forfeiture of Crimea and other territories that had been under the Crimean Khanate's former jurisdiction. Despite suffering a military defeat at the hands of an alliance led by Great Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire

during the Crimean War of 1853-1856,<sup>3</sup> the Russian Empire retained control of the peninsula.

**From a Legal Standpoint: Crimea is legally part of Ukraine as of February 19, 1954.** The motives for the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine can be found in 1955, the historical –archival journal “*Istoricheskii archiv*” transcribing declassified documents from the former Soviet archives. The two official rationales for the purpose of the transfer of Crimea are:<sup>4</sup>

1. The cession of Crimea is a noble act on the part of the Russian people to commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reunification of Ukraine with Russia, and to evince the boundless trust and love the Russians feel toward the Ukrainian people (referencing the *Treaty of Pereyaslav* signed in 1654 by representatives of the Ukrainian Cossack Hetmanate and Tsar Aleksei of Muscovy); and

2. The transfer was a natural outgrowth of the territorial proximity of Crimea to Ukraine, the commonalities of their economies, and the close agricultural and cultural ties between Crimean oblast and the Ukrainian SSR.

### **Are the 1954 Rationales Rational?**

The two proclaimed rationales for the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine is far-fetched given the irrelevance of the *Treaty of Pereyaslav* and the unfounded claim that Crimeans are culturally or economically close to Ukraine. In actuality, the Treaty has nothing to do with Crimea for two main reasons: first, the Treaty was passed 130 years before Russian rule over Crimea began, and second, *Pereyaslav* is in central Ukraine, not far from Kiev. A more thorough analysis of Crimea's population in the 1950s reveals that 75% of the 1.1 million population<sup>5</sup> were ethnic Russians, disproving the second rational—that Crimea was transferred because of its strong cultural ties to Ukraine. More importantly, the population of Crimea was more Russian than it

had been for centuries. This is because of Stalinist regime's deportations of Tatars, Armenians, Bulgarians, and Greeks from Crimea.

Economically, Crimea was a popular tourist destination for people from other parts of the USSR, thus its economy was not tied to Ukraine at all. However, the genuine economic rationale resides in the strategic goal undertaken by Moscow to transfer the responsibility of reconstructing one of the most severely affected regions during World War II to Ukraine. Yet, the question of why Russia would cede Crimea, a decade after the war, continues to persist. The concept of a genuine territorial connection between the peninsula and Ukraine does exist. Crimea only shares land with a territory of Ukraine not Russia; but stating this as a reason for the lands transfer seems a bit nonsensical, given that this land connection had existed as long as the peninsula and this never stopped Russia from claiming Crimea at any point in history.<sup>6</sup> So why would the territorial Bond matter now?

### **The True Motives Behind Crimea's 1954 Transfer**

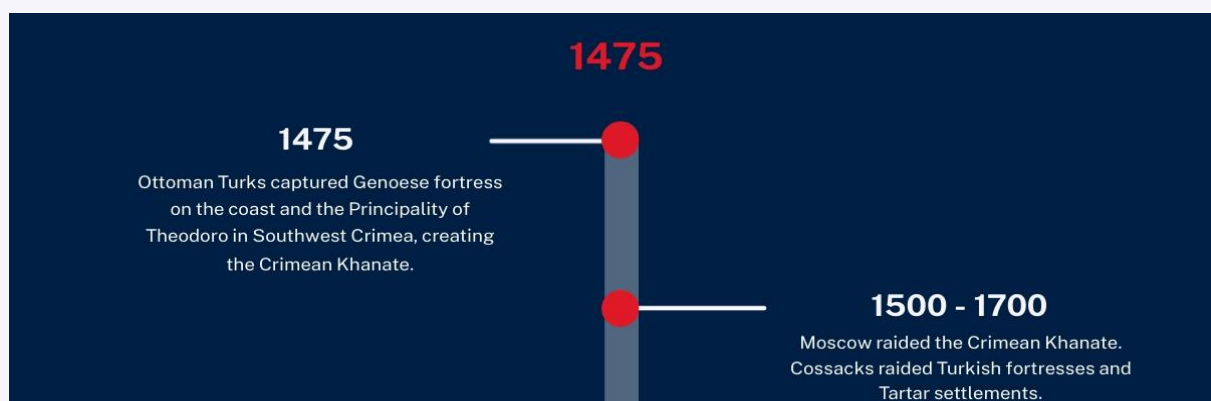
**Context:** The real reasons for the handover of Crimea to Ukraine are explained by the continued power struggles in the USSR, of which Nikita Khrushchev was one of the most important figures. Khrushchev, who led the Ukrainian Communist Party from the late 1930s until the end of 1949, emerged as a significant figure within the UkrSSR. Khrushchev directed a bloody civil war in the annexed western regions of Ukraine, notably Volynia and Galicia, in which he used ruthless violence to establish Soviet control over the region. In September 1953, upon assuming the role of First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Khrushchev engages in a fierce power struggle against Georgi Malenkov, the incumbent Prime Minister of the USSR. Following the political developments, Khrushchev intends to gather as much support as possible in order to mobilize opposition to remove Melankov from office.

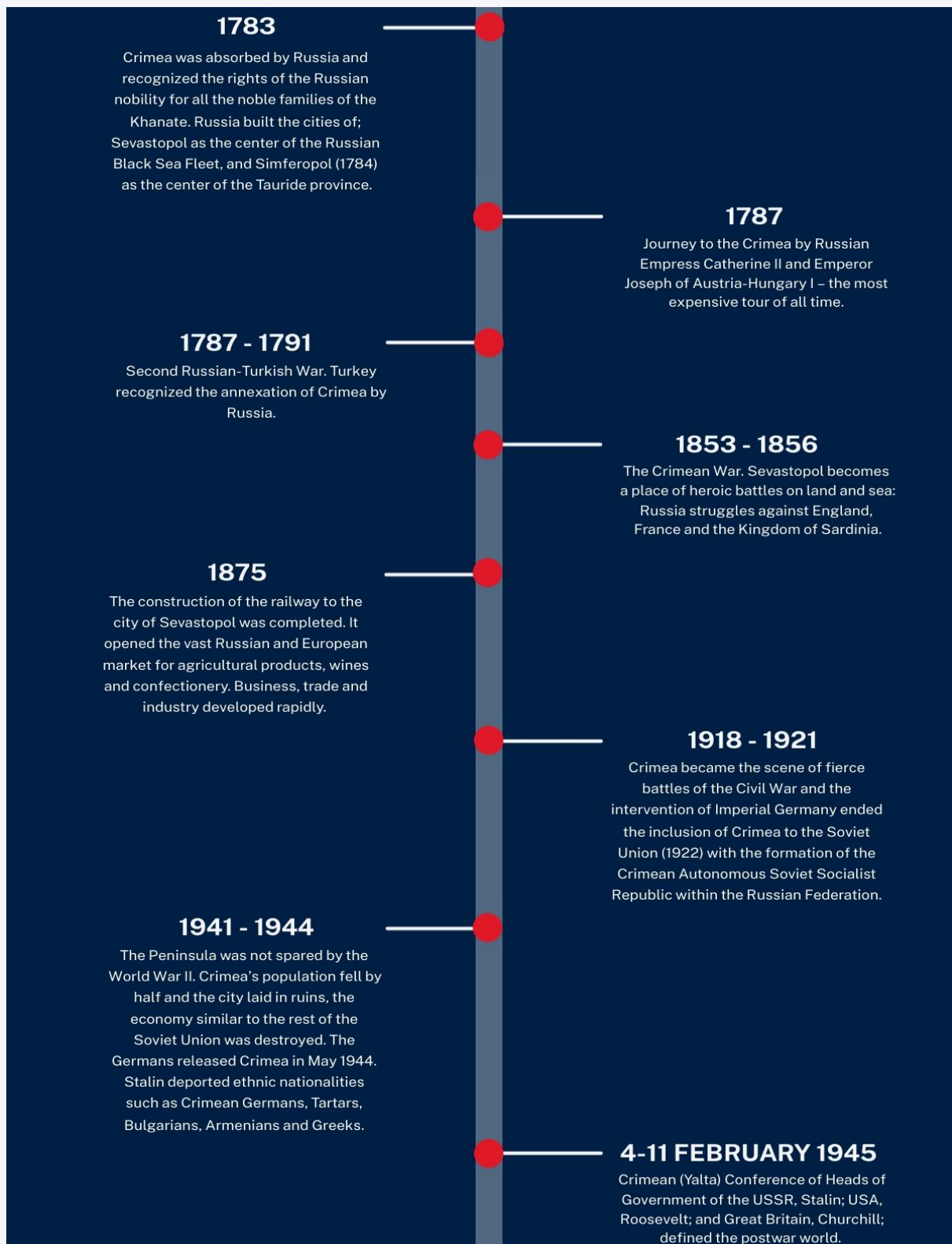


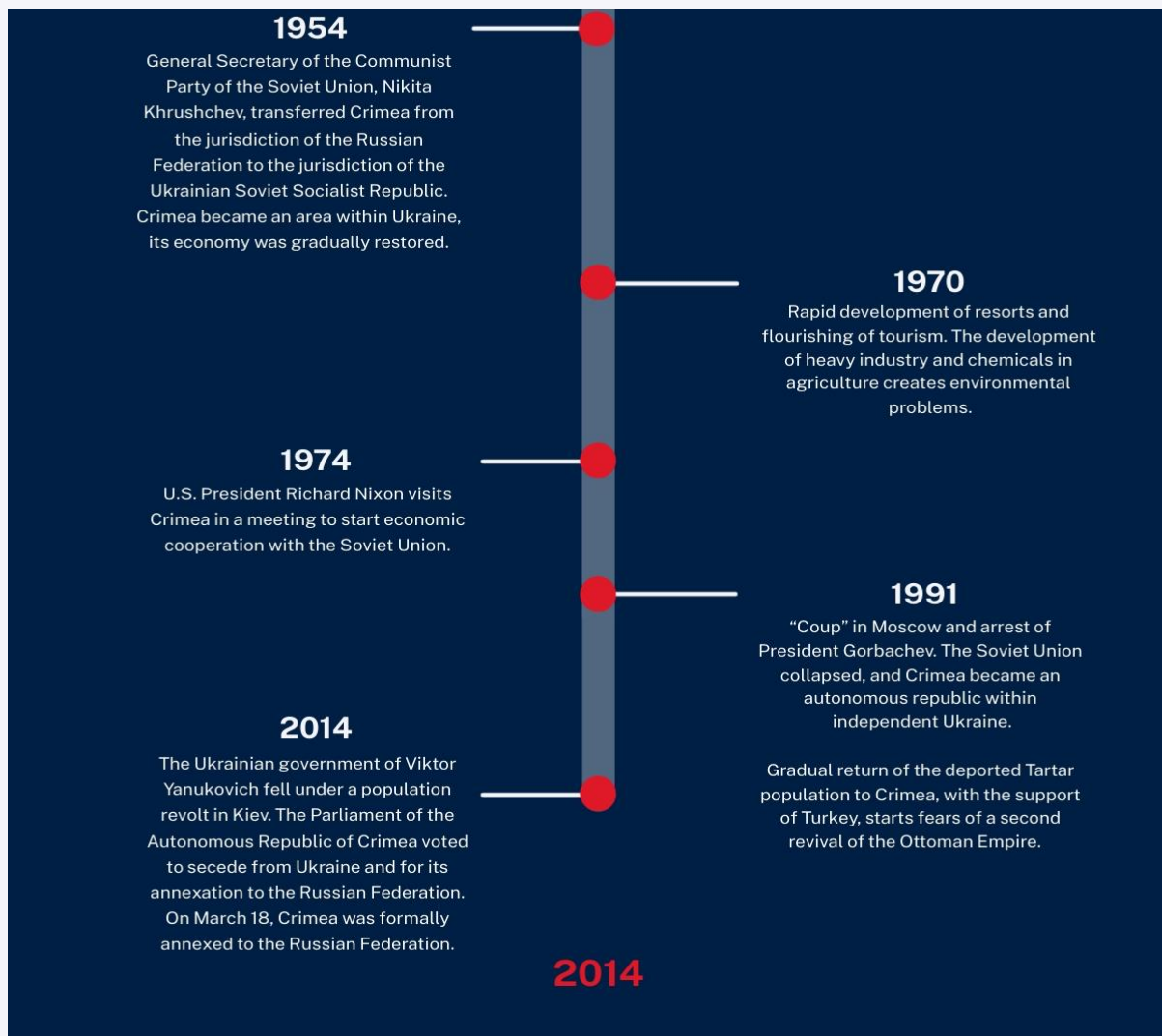
**Political Strategy of Crimea's Transfer:** Khrushchev was keeping an eye on Oleksiy Kyrychenko's vote, who had taken over as the Communist Party of Ukraine's first secretary in early 1953, in order to get his support for Malenkov's removal through the CPSU Presidium. Khrushchev devised the grand strategy of expanding Ukrainian territory in order to gain popular support, particularly the elite. Therefore, from a political standpoint, Khrushchev strategically utilized the transfer of Crimea to strengthen his authority and influence over the USSR Presidium. Oleksiy Kyrychenko was at odds with Mikhail Khrushchev over his previously inflicted violence in western regions of Ukraine and openly criticized Khrushchev. Recognizing his lack of automatic support from Kyrychenko, it was necessary to transfer Crimea in order to secure his backing in the impending clash with Melakov and, ultimately, push for his removal. The transfer of Crimea was carried out in compliance with Article 18 of the 1936 Soviet Constitution, and the republic parliaments of the RSFSR and the UkrSSR granted their approval.

## CRIMEA - CHANGING HANDS BETWEEN HISTORY AND RUSSIA'S REALPOLITIK

### Chronology of Important Dates (History of Crimea)







Source: Crimea History.<sup>7</sup>

## Is Russia's Realpolitik Working?

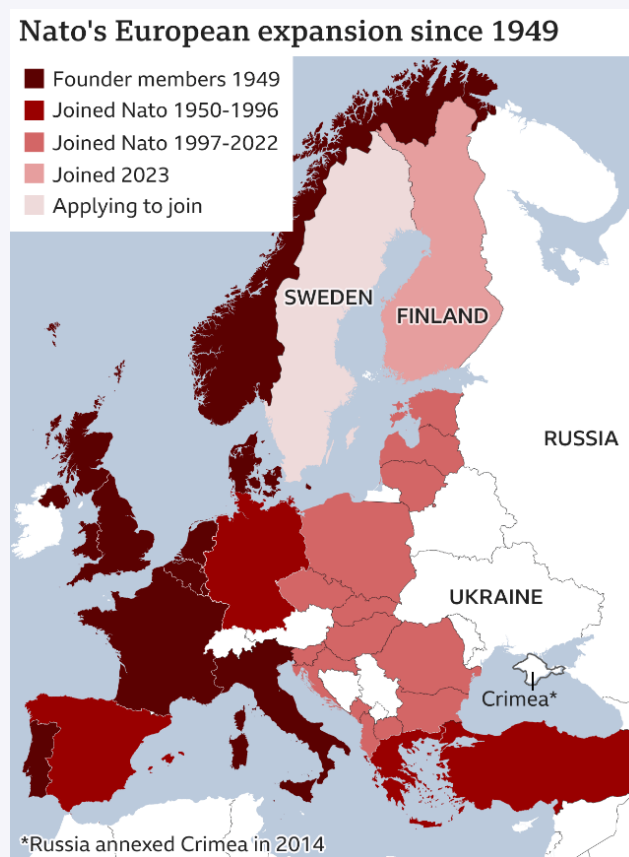
Another way to look at the annexation of Crimea and its subsequent events is through the balance of threat theory- a modified realist theory that centers around the alliance behavior of states driven by the threats they perceive from other states.<sup>8</sup> The major distinction according to this theory is: generally, states balance by allying against a perceived threat, but very weak states are inclined to bandwagon with the rising threat in hopes to protect themselves. Russia's realpolitik potentially made a miscalculation in predicting Ukraine's course of action, which was to align with Moscow in order to prevent losses and shield itself from perceived threats posed by Russia itself. On the contrary, Ukraine's accession to NATO

and preference to ally with the West changes the geopolitical map of Europe, one that comes with calculated risks for Moscow.

In this case, the views of Stephen M. Walt in his article “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power” should be considered to distinguish power from threat. Walt argues states will not balance against those that are rising to power but do not display offensive intentions. This explains why Russia’s offensive power and aggressive intentions led to Ukraine’s ambition to join NATO. Balancing strategy, though it might be an effective way to deal with perceived threats, is bound to fail and backfire and be counterproductive in nature. This is the case with Ukraine's NATO membership, which further complicates the security situation with Russia and consequently amplifies the perception of threat posed by Russia's actions.

In this sense, Russia's actions are seen through the lens of international realism (known as *realpolitik*) to be strategic, tactical, and calculated. In this context, Russia's efforts to forge a solid base within its sphere of influence make sense, as it views the US and the West as posing a threat as NATO expands closer to its borders. This is why the expansionist approach of NATO unintentionally sparked a war with Russia,<sup>9</sup> especially with promised future memberships of Ukraine and Georgia to the alliance. Given the eastward expansion of NATO, the takeover of Crimea functions as a countermeasure to balance out the perceived threats to Russia’s vital interests.<sup>10</sup> Still, the primary flaw in the justifications offered by *realpolitik* in international relations (IR) is that it fails to explain why the US and the West want to turn Ukraine into a western stronghold.<sup>11</sup> The most prominent brand of realist interpretation on Russia’s invasion and its precedents dominating IR remains relevant: that Russia's strategy was to counteract Western efforts to transform Ukraine into

a Western stronghold and ultimately strengthen what it perceives to be a hostile military alliance at its doorstep, as stated plainly by John Mearsheimer.



### Box 3: The Creation of NATO<sup>12</sup>

**Establishment:** established in the aftermath of World War II, the organization implemented the North Atlantic Treaty, signed in Washington, D.C., on 4th April 1949.

**Objective:** protect the security and freedom of all the countries that are members (the Allies). **Original Goal:** block Soviet expansion in Europe after World War II.

**East European Entrants After the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991:** Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

**Working:** During the Cold War, NATO operated as a check on the threat posed by the Soviet Union. The alliance remained in place after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact and has been involved in military operations in the Balkans, the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa.

**Membership:** Membership is open to any European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area. Any decision to invite a country to join the Alliance is taken by the North Atlantic Council, NATO's main political decision-making body, based on consensus among all Allies.

**Structure: (1) Political:** NATO promotes democratic values and enables members to consult and cooperate on defense and security-related issues to solve problems, build trust and, in the long run, prevent conflict.

**(2) Military:** NATO is committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes. If diplomatic efforts fail, it has the military power to undertake crisis-management operations. These are carried out under the collective defense clause of NATO's founding treaty - Article 5 of the Washington Treaty or under a United Nations mandate, alone or in cooperation with other countries and international organizations.

## Monroe Doctrine Rationale

Russia recognized the 20<sup>th</sup> NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008, which had the primary goal of extending NATO's reach across Europe, as a declaration of war and thus culminating in its annexation of Crimea. The question that the majority of IR theories seek to address is why Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 when it could have done so at any time within the last

25 years. The annexation of Crimea cannot be solely attributed to the interplay between rational and irrational decision-making on behalf of Russia. In a deterrence situation, what matters is the convergence of political and military calculations, which Russia or any other state would seize to dominate its regions of influence. In other words, in line with the US Monroe Doctrine of 1823,<sup>13</sup> Russia views any action in Eastern Europe as hostile just as much the US would similarly view any intervention in the Western Hemisphere. Taking liberties to decide the future of Eastern Europe, especially interventions in Ukraine's domestic affairs while denying Russia a similar role, was a strategic mistake on behalf of the US and Western powers that was aimed at undermining Russia's role as a regional hegemon.

Structural Realist	Western policymakers failed to see how their actions could be seen as a threat to Russian interests thus Russia's assertive actions are part of a hard balancing response to US hegemony.
Liberal	Putting domestic politics as its center of analysis, Russia's authoritarian tendencies and elites' aversion to democratization explain the real reasons for Russia's permanent shift towards more nationalist, combative rhetoric.
Constructivist	Root the crisis in the nature of interactions between Europe, the United States, Russia, and Ukraine. Changes in discursive patterns made the annexation of Crimea thinkable, natural, and possible.
Social Identity (Status)	Russia pursues a strategy of social competition as a response to perceived slights: perceived ignorance over Russia's social status explains the sources of Russia's resentment vis-à-vis the West.

**Table 1:** Russia's Behavior According to Different IR Theories. Source: Political Psychology.<sup>14</sup>



From second left, Sweden's Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Sweden's Crown Princess Victoria pose in front of the flag of Sweden and other alliance nations after a ceremony to mark the accession of Sweden to NATO at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Monday, March 11, 2024. (AP Photo/Geert Vanden Wijngaert)

## Ongoing Implications

In the world's ever-changing regions of influence, Crimea's annexation situates Russia's military response within the larger frame of Europe and paints the picture of the implications of a changed regional security infrastructure. The emerging regional order consists of four major regions of rivalry: (1) Western Hemisphere, (2) Northeast Asia, (3) Europe, and (4) the Gulf. **In a globalized system where balance of power is divided, the emergence of rivalrous regions guarantees that the ascent of any power will not go unnoticed.** This holds true with regard to the emergence of middle powers, such as Ukraine or the rise of great powers, such as Russia and China. According to this rationale, the expansion of military alliances like NATO is perceived as an existential threat that states, such as Russia, would mobilize its military should it come too close to its borders. On the



other side of these arguments is the prospect of Russia’s reassertion and hope of regaining regional dominance. Knowing that Russia is close to achieving this goal has been pushing several countries to rush to join NATO. Leaving behind 200 years of nonalignment and military non-alliance, Sweden joined NATO on March 7, 2024.

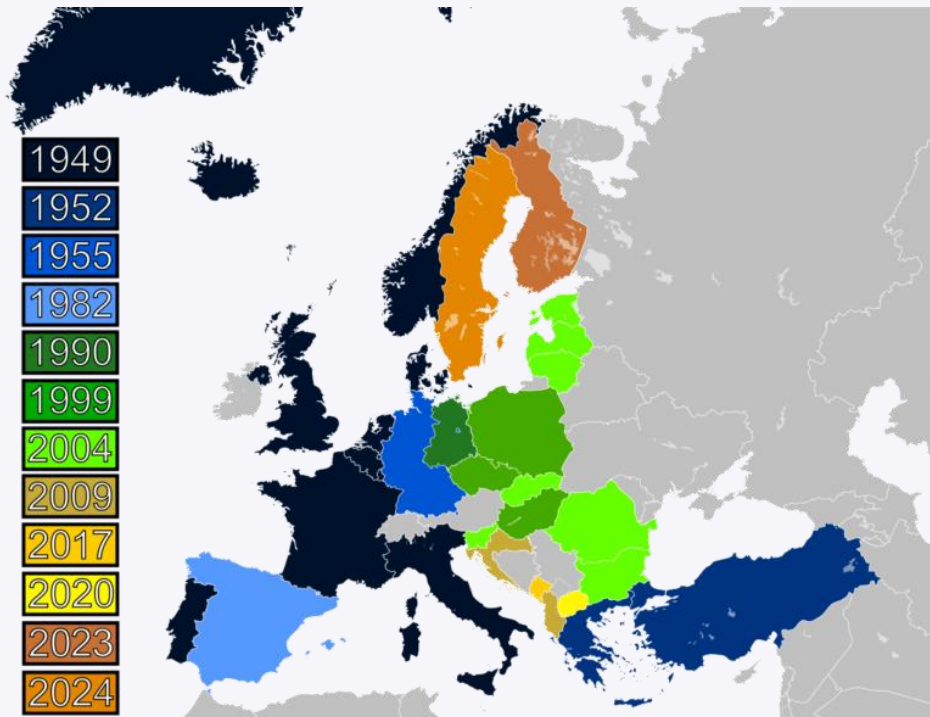
Whether Russia’s Ukraine invasion led to Sweden joining NATO, the alliance’s growing fears of Russian influence in the region seem to escalate tension in the near future. Finland and Sweden’s entrances into NATO provide a crucial link between the Atlantic and Baltic regions, with the latter adding cutting-edge submarines and a sizable fleet of locally built Gripen fighter jets.<sup>15</sup> In the event that a military confrontation with Russia breaks out, the two Nordic states fortify NATO’s northern flank and reduce the likelihood that the Baltic states would be cut off from other members.<sup>16</sup> Russia’s threats to take political and military countermeasures will likely pose security challenges to NATO as Moscow builds up its forces in its northwestern flank, including plans to carry out long-range precision strikes against targets in Finland and Sweden.<sup>17</sup> Russia’s perception of the shifting geopolitical environment will also lead Moscow to resort to nonconventional tools of aggression providing Russia with an asymmetric advantage against the West.<sup>18</sup> Europe’s evolving security architecture carries numerous challenges and risks that needs to be wary of Russia’s responses, especially as NATO expands from the Arctic Ocean to the Baltic Sea.

Date	Round	Country
February 18, 1952	First	 Greece
		 Turkey
May 9, 1955	Second	 West Germany
May 30, 1982	Third	 Spain
October 3, 1990	—	 German Reunification
March 12, 1999	Fourth	 Czech Republic
		 Hungary

		 Poland
March 29, 2004	Fifth	 Bulgaria
		 Estonia
		 Latvia
		 Lithuania
		 Romania
		 Slovakia
		 Slovenia
April 1, 2009	Sixth	 Albania
		 Croatia
June 5, 2017	Seventh	 Montenegro
March 27, 2020	Eighth	 North Macedonia
April 4, 2023	Ninth	 Finland
March 7, 2024	Tenth	 Sweden

**Table 2:** NATO's collective defense system of 32 European and American countries.  
Source: NATO Historical Enlargement (Wikipedia)

### NATO's New Map



## Conclusion

Crimea's strategic geopolitical location has been an inalienable and vital component of Russia ever since the expansion of the Russian Empire. A fragmented identity has developed and persists in Crimea due to its cultural, historical, and economic circumstances, as well as the demographic shifts caused by massive deportations over its history. The crisis of Crimea's annexation stems from a confluence of historical circumstances and Russian realpolitik, which considers asserting its influence and protecting its interests against perceived Western threats, especially in light of NATO expansion in close proximity to its borders. Overall, the annexation factors into a combination of power dynamics and rivalry, historical legacies, and strategic geopolitical calculations that continuously shapes Eastern Europe and beyond.

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