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**THE FROZEN CONFLICTS STRATEGY
THE RUSSIAN INDIRECT APPROACH TOWARD USSR
SECURITY STUDIES - THE CRIMEA CASE**

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Abstract:

Starting from the main characteristics of frozen conflicts, this paper assesses the Ukraine crisis, analyzing the main drivers and key factors that underlie the conflict situation. In order to achieve a complete picture, these factors cover the main instruments that Russia managed to drive the crisis: the exceptional status of Crimea, the settlement of Russian Black Sea Fleet naval base on Crimea, the Russian Information Campaign, and the energy weapon by Russia. Eventually, some recommendation for the role of U.S. military will conclude, in order to frame a desired end-state for regional and international détente.

Key words: frozen, conflicts, crisis, drivers, factors

1. Introduction

One hundred years ago, Halford John Mackinder stated, “Who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island.” These days, it seems that no one has learned this lesson better than the Russian Federation, implying that the battle for Eastern Europe is not over. Probably, the Cold War is not over, leaving room for Cold War 2.0 or Neo-Cold War. This time, in 2014, the Russian approach seems to be a completely new, an unconventional one, refuting the traditional strategy of Soviet Union strategy highlighted – “democratization by tanks.”

The scorching fault line of the day - Crimea - has become a major challenge to regional and even global security, not because of engagement of the military violence, but rather comprehensive approach to Russia. Within only three weeks, Russia occupied and annexed Crimea, part of the sovereign state Ukraine, violating international laws, without any engagement or battle fight. Authorized by Russian Parliament, President Vladimir Putin, as Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces, employed Russian armed forces at the beginning of March 2014, in order to “protect” the Russian ethnic communities and Russian military facilities in Crimea. The applied strategy in taking over Crimea based on very different combination of assets than Russia used to know: paramilitary forces (called local self-defense squads), cyber-attack, information operations, and deception (maskirovka)¹, Special Purpose Forces, naval blockade supported by conventional units (airborne/ air assault troops, naval infantry, navy ships, helicopters).

Although Russia considers legitimate the military intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, the actions prove the manifest intention of Russia to rebuild its sphere of influence through the military and strategic exploitation of frozen conflicts.

Starting from the main characteristics of frozen conflicts, this paper assesses the Ukraine crisis, analyzing the main drivers and key factors that underlie the conflict

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2. The Evolution of Security Environment on the Black Sea Extended Region

The key element that worked as a catalyzed of Ukraine crisis is the status of Crimea as a **frozen conflict**. In according with the definition, frozen conflicts are those which violent ethno-political conflict over secession has led to the establishment of a *de facto* regime that is recognized by neither the international community nor the rump state from which secession occurred. Although any number of endogenous factors can contribute to a conflict's frozen character, a common theme throughout frozen conflicts is a rump state's inability (in this case, Ukraine) and/or lack of political will to alter the status quo.

This inability and/or reluctance are often directly related to the potential backlash from exogenous actors that any alteration to the status quo is liable to provoke.

As this paper demonstrates further, exogenous actors, in this case Russia, play a key role in resolution of Crimea frozen conflict.²

The Black Sea and South Caucasus regions are a new Euro-Atlantic borderland plagued by Soviet-legacy frozen conflicts: Moldova (Trans-Dniester), Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh), and Ukraine (Crimea). Three of these conflicts were orchestrated, and are being conserved, by Moscow's policies and the involvement of Russian military forces on the ground. In the fourth case, Russia indirectly supports one side politic and militarily. Obviously frozen conflicts are positioned in near abroad of Russia where the big cultural or ideological diversity, religious cleavage amplify the conflict (called *fault lines of civilizations* by Samuel Huntington in his classical "The Clash of Civilizations"). Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are positioned between Orthodox and Islamic civilizations and Ukraine between Orthodox and Western civilizations³.

Frozen conflicts are rooted in Stalin's Soviet policies in the 1930-1945, the deportation of ethnic minority groups to the periphery of the Soviet Union. After that, Russian ethnics repopulated the left areas. The deportations of 1943-1944 uprooted entire ethnic groups, nearly 2 million people in total. Among them were several non-Slavic nationalities of the Crimea and the northern Caucasus: Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, Turks, Bulgarians, Crimean Greeks, Romanians, and Armenians. Effectively, the whole Black Sea coastal region was cleared of ethnic minorities⁴. Moreover, the administrative re-organization of the Soviet Union policy that administrative borders republics were established on criteria other than historical ones resulted in many present territorial disputes between ex-Soviet countries. Beyond the claimed economic and social reasons, these Soviet policies were designed to strengthen central authority, control, and power of the union over the republics and population, in the event of USSR dissolution.

Since 1991, after collapse of Soviet Union until present, Russia has played the key disruptive "re-colonizing" role by supporting the breakaway Russian ethnic enclaves military and politically. The corrosive influence of the existing frozen conflicts in the Black Sea region remains the most dangerous source of insecurity for the EU and NATO at their eastern border, affecting the statehood, sovereignty, and democratic process of countries in the region. Frozen conflicts are also the main cause of asymmetric security threats such as the terrorism, transnational organized crime, traffic of human beings,

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armaments, black economies, and the justification of a Russian “stabilizing” and supposedly peacekeeping presence.⁵ Moreover, the frozen conflicts drain economic resources and political energies from these weak countries and impoverished societies; generate rampant corruption and organized crime, prevent the consolidation of nation-states, and foster instability and insecurity region-wide. Thus, the conflicts undermine Euro-Atlantic strategic, economic, and democratic interests in this region, and jeopardize the prospects of integrating its countries.

3. The battle for Ukraine Crimea and the lessons of frozen conflicts

In 2008, Putin dismembered Georgia, completing Russia’s de facto annexation of the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, whom Russian forces had helped remove from Georgia’s orbit already in 1992–93, and which Putin had aggressively taken under Moscow’s control. Moreover, while Moldova’s Trans-Dniester may be the most forgotten of the post-Soviet conflicts, Russian policy has been the same there. As Moldova moves toward the European Union, Russian-dominated Trans-Dniester is expressing its interest to join (no surprise) the Eurasian Union. Most recently, its leaders have asked to follow Crimea’s lead into Russia. Putin’s message to all these countries and now to Ukraine is the same: If they go West, Russia will dismember them and prevent them from regaining their sovereignty. Since the conflicts can always be used to stage various provocations, Moscow can use its influence to keep these countries weak and vulnerable. To this message, neither the European Union nor the United States have had any credible response: The European Union’s promises of deep free trade agreements, for example, do little to address Putin’s threats.⁶

The refusal of Ukrainian President Yanukovich and his government to sign the association agreement to EU into the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius during 28 to 29 November 2013 triggered a chain reaction in Ukrainian society, which led to the final crisis. The main reason results from the historical cleavage of the Ukrainian nation regarding the orientation on the East or West. This cleavage is based on ethnic composition, religious and cultural identity as the existing conflict within the Ukrainian elite. Since obtaining its independence, Ukraine has always oscillated between East and West, President Kuchma's administration (1994-2004) attempted to place the country in a position of relative balance between the Russian Federation and the West and promoted the expansion of presidential powers with the aim of strengthen internal cohesion. Yushchenko’s inauguration as president of the state in 2005 and the so-called “Orange Revolution” Ukraine gave hopes to sway more towards the West. In 2005, an action plan EU-Ukraine, made by Kiev government, was looking to increase the EU integration and NATO.⁷ The Bush administration hoped for a government "Orange" to bring Ukraine closer to the West. George W. Bush paid a visit to Ukraine in June 2006, followed by Ukraine's invitation to join a Membership Action Plan to NATO.

Disputes with Russia on gas and the economic crisis resulted in Kiev and Ukraine's political instability. Different visions of the elites in Kiev on the alignment of the Eastern or Western side did the project of Ukraine's integration to NATO is not viable. Moreover, within the Ukrainian population there is a big disagreement regarding the western or eastern option. In a study in 2012 focused on the population perception on EU integration, most respondents in Kiev (51%) and in Western Ukraine (57 %) chose Europe while most of Crimea (71%) and in the east (53 %) chose Russia.⁸

The first key driver in Crimean Crisis is without doubt, **the exceptional status of Crimea**, the issue remained unresolved since independence of Ukraine in 1991. Crimea, as a part of Imperial Russia since 1873, was handed to Soviet Ukraine by the leader of USSR,

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Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 (as a moral reparation for hunger which Ukrainian people was convicted by Stalin as well as Khrushchev had been of Ukrainian origins). Even under communist rule, during 1984-1991, Crimea achieved an autonomous status (Crimean Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic). Because of ratification of the 1997 Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership, Russia finally recognized Ukraine's borders and territorial integrity and, in a way, accepted Ukraine's sovereignty over Crimea. After 1992, the regional leaders in Crimea focused on pursuing

The first key element in Crimean autonomy is the Russian ethnic population of Crimea, almost 70% from 2.35 million of habitants.⁹ Although, in 1991, the people voted in favor of Ukraine's independence, in 1992, local pro-Russian politicians launched a campaign to have the peninsula transferred back to the Russia. Because of the systemic weakness of Ukrainian government, Crimea has kept the autonomy status until present, having a local Parliament, president, and government.¹⁰

The second key element, which preserved this status, was the continuous involvement of Russia in Crimean politics, especially in question of region's independence because of perception that Crimea is a historic part of Russia. For the Federation, the difficulty in accepting Ukraine's independence after collapse of the Soviet Union has been accompanied by a strong conviction that Ukrainian independence is a temporary event. Russia has sought to exploit the political fragility of Ukraine, by increasing its financial and political support for pro-Russian, anti-NATO, groups in Crimea in hope of further destabilizing the country's domestic political situation. Through intelligence services, Russia has supported the Pan-Slavic nationalist movements and pro-Russian political parties in Crimea, in attempt to counter any Ukrainian pro-NATO or pro-western political attitude.¹¹

The President Putin's concentration on Ukraine as a part of larger effort to re-create a sphere of influence in the near abroad is proof of his desire to anchor Russia in Europe even on non-democratic terms. Ukraine is the pivot state that in and of itself transforms Russia. Abutting the Black Sea in the south and former Eastern European satellites to the West, Ukraine's very independence keeps Russia largely out of Europe. With Greek and Roman Catholics in the Western part of Ukraine and Eastern Orthodox in the East, western Ukraine is breeding ground for Ukrainian nationalism while the east favors closer relations with Russia.¹² Zbigniew Brzezinski writes that without Ukraine, Russia can still be an empire, but a "predominately Asian" one, drawn further into conflicts with Caucasian and Central Asian states. Nevertheless, with Ukraine back under Russian domination, Russia adds 46 million people to its western -oriented demography, and suddenly challenges Europe, even as it is integrated into it.¹³

4. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation

The second, and probably the most important driver of Ukraine Crisis is the settlement of the **naval base of Russian Black Sea Fleet** on Sevastopol, Crimea. This naval base together other Russian military units deployed in Crimea provide for Russia a double strategic relevance. On the one hand, Russian output to warm seas (through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles) further to the Russian best partner from Middle East – Syria – where Russia maintain another naval base on Tartus and other weapons trade business. On the other hand, the Russian Black Sea fleet provides a Russian military presence in the eastern flank of NATO.

During Cold War, Soviet Union systematic attempted to break up the containment by different strategies, supporting the communist insurgencies in Korea War and Vietnam War, installing nuclear missiles during Cuban Crisis and the expansion in Afghanistan in

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1980. All these were failed. Currently, the expansion of NATO to the Eastern Europe and the recently Ukraine aspirations to join NATO and the European Union made the strategic challenge of the Crimea has become invaluable for Russia. Crimea became the main geopolitical instrument of Russia in the South East of Europe.

Kremlin considers a U.S. military presence so obvious, near its borders, as a threat to national security. This led to statements in which tensions on the topic is evident. Such discourse is the Russian Chief of General Staff Nikolai Makarov, in May 2012, stating that Russia would not hesitate to use preemptive attack, if the development of the NATO anti-ballistic missile shield will reach the third stage. All this can be seen as a security dilemma - NATO Member States' efforts to increase security are perceived as a threat by other states. Moreover, this attitude is supported even by official documents of the Federation. Thus, the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2008), it clearly stated, "Russia maintains its negative attitude towards NATO enlargement, especially against plans to include Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance, and to bring the military infrastructure NATO near the borders of Russia."¹⁴

Moreover, the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (2010) lists the No. 1 military threat of Russia – the desire to increase the potential of the NATO force by global functions carried out in violation of international law by moving military infrastructure of NATO member states closer to the borders of Russia.¹⁵ This idea is highlighted by the contents of the fourth military threat identified - creating and deploying strategic defensive anti-ballistic missile systems that undermine the overall balance and correlation of forces in the field of nuclear missiles (reference to the AEGIS-SM3 ABM systems deployed in Poland, Romania, and Turkey).

The social effect of the presence of Black Sea Fleet is also important. Black Sea Fleet is not only a military structure but also a commercial one, as a source of employment for about 40,000 people in Sevastopol. Black Sea Fleet is the owner of numerous vaguely defined properties and facilities; it has a powerful and potentially intelligence service; and it has been used as an instrument of economic and political leverage. In this context, the Black Sea Fleet was a source of tension for Ukraine.¹⁶

5. Energy Weapon in the International Relations at the Beginning of 21st Century

The third key driver of instability in Ukraine and Crimea is the continuously **Information Campaign carried out by Russia** that results in effect on Russian nationalism and ethnic conflicts not only in Crimea, but also within Ukraine, especially in eastern part. Crimea has a special place in the Russian collective mental and perception (Crimean War in 1854, World War II). During the Soviet era, Crimea grew as a naval base. The peninsula also became a popular place of retirement for top communist politicians, officials, and high-ranking military. This created a fertile ground for Russia's Information Operations that stimulates Russian nationalism and Soviet nostalgia among the local population. Russia finances a wide network of various non-governmental organizations in Crimea. In return, these organizations see their role largely in serving the political interests of different powerful groups in Russia.

Since the Orange Revolution, Russia's information campaign in Crimea has become especially proficient and systematic. The information campaign increased in intensity in 2006-2008. The voice of propaganda gets louder and aggressive, every time Moscow needs to put pressure on Ukraine. Every time when Ukraine reaches a milestone on the road towards EU and NATO integration, Moscow always intensifies its counter-propaganda efforts. Statesmen and officials, political parties, civic organizations, youth movements, the

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Cossacks, the Orthodox Church and universities – all these pro-Russian entities have become instruments in Russia's propaganda war with the general aim of controlling the minds of ordinary people in Crimea. People are mobilized using pro-Russian Black Sea Fleet and pro-Russian language slogans as well as anti NATO, anti-US and anti-Tartar campaigns.¹⁷

Undoubtedly, the fourth driver of the crisis is **Ukraine's energy dependence on Russia and the related effects of energy infrastructure in Ukraine**. The geographical position of Ukraine and pipeline network built during the Soviet Union era led Ukraine to play an important role in the European energy sector. Consequently, today Ukraine is positioned as a major player in the European energy security so that energy disputes between Russia and Ukraine is not only a problem Ukrainian or Russian, but get a geopolitical nature.

Currently Ukraine is the throughput of 80% natural gas resources imported by the EU from Russia, representing 25% of total imported by the European Union. Bilateral relations between Russia and Ukraine have been strained energy in terms of transit gas prices, which are some obvious signals for both Westerners and the Ukrainians.

Tough policy of Gazprom, which had a negative impact on Ukraine and the European Union, highlighting the political and geopolitical connotations, the national interests of Russia in its near abroad. Russia has always said that he would never accept NATO forces on its proximity. To prevent such circumstances, Russia is able to act in the most drastic manner - the energy weapon (energy blackmail) - in order to ensure national security and warning the West to abandon its policies that threaten national or state interests, where Ukraine is a vital one. Also represents a warning to Ukraine, causing it to review its strategic options related to the accession to the European Union and NATO.

It is obvious that Russia has trade and energy interests. The tense situation could be a warning to EU member states on the instability of energy transit through Ukraine, which could encourage the EU to participate more actively in the project Nord Stream and South Stream. On the other hand, the Russia's pressures on Ukraine are based on interest to acquire and control the energy infrastructure in Ukraine.

In this context, it would be well to draw attention to nuance. The official cause of the gas conflict between Ukraine and Russia was not paying the debt for gas by Kiev. However, Trans-Dniester debt is much higher, and then convinces us, once again, that the real reason for the conflict between Kiev and Moscow had no financial connotation, but a geopolitical and geo-energy.¹⁸

Even the signed agreement by Dmitry Medvedev and his counterpart, Viktor Yanukovich in 2010, on maintaining Russian naval base in Sevastopol until 2042, in return for a 30% off the price of Russian gas delivered to Ukraine (a reduction considered a part of the rent paid by Moscow for this base), proves express interest in bringing Ukraine into Russian sphere of influence. In fact, energy disputes between Ukraine and Russia in 2006 and 2009 were based on political differences, or rather the lack of cooperation between the two countries and harming Russia's interests in the region. The negative consequences of political, social, economic and energy both in Ukraine and in Europe led to the strengthening of Russia's position in the region. On the one hand, Moscow has tightened claims regarding its military presence in the Black Sea as a NATO counterbalance the region. On the other hand, we are witnessing the promotion of energy interests in the region through the South Stream project, which remains in close competition with Western Nabucco project. However, a consolidation of the Russian position in the Black Sea would be a stimulating factor in the acceleration of South Stream gas pipeline launched, amid interest from keeping the West to begin construction of the

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Nabucco pipeline to reduce dependence on Russian gas and to control the axis of energy resources.

Add to this the fact that Ukraine is facing a deep economic crisis, widespread corruption in the government institutions and the serious social problems that, cumulatively led to the outbreak and development of violent social upheaval in the major industrial centers of Ukraine in late 2013.

6. Geopolitical and geostrategic coordinates

We do not know if geopolitical theories or ideologies justify the decisions of the leader from Kremlin, but the Cold War 2.0 continues. Russia never abandoned the attempt to pierce the containment built since 1947 (at the suggestion of George Kennan who foresaw the mindset of Soviet leaders). If in the past, Russia has made it through traditional means (direct military intervention like Afghanistan as the 80) or indirect (supporting communist insurgency in Korea, Vietnam), nowadays Russia seems to test a completely new, unconventional, asymmetrical, irregular way - strategy of frozen conflicts - on the limit of international law.

Once secured its rear in Central Asia and the Far East, through signing of security cooperation agreement Shanghai Cooperation Organization (with China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), it seems that the main effort of Russia is focused on westward expansion, to Ukraine and beyond the eastern boundary of NATO. Russia has become a revisionist power, seeking to reestablish influence in the former Soviet space and wants to change security order after the Cold War, which considers is unfair, being imposed by the West at a time when it was weak. President Putin has dissected this issue in February 2007, into Security Conference in Munich, when he stated that Russia does not need lessons on ethics in international relations from the West and only national interests will dictate Russia's policy. The Western victory in the Cold War changed much, to be sure, but it did not altogether mitigate the facts of geography. Moreover, a resurgent Russia might be willing to contemplate disruption in order to create strategic space.¹⁹

Ukraine crisis analysis has shown that Russian actions have been successful because of some essential international factors that facilitated the strategic decisions of the Russian Federation. The rebalance of the U.S. foreign policy towards Asia-Pacific, the major reducing military expenditures of European countries, the effects of economic and financial crisis, the EU energy dependence to Russia, and obviously the close relations between the Kremlin leader and Germany made that economic sanctions on Russia not to be effective and NATO military response is also a minor.

On the one hand, Ukraine is still uncertain on future orientation towards the EU and NATO or the Russian Federation. The clearest answer we will have after May 2014 after the presidential elections. The social, ethnic, cultural, and religious cleavage (east and west) of the Ukrainian nation remains the biggest issue, which all domestic and international actors must consider in their strategy.

On the other hand, Russia has proposed restoring power status of the international arena, while maintaining close proximity influence on part of its strategy. Often adopting a strategy of "divide et impera," Russia often takes part of separatist countries (Crimea, Abkhazia, South-Ossetia), supporting to maintain instability in Eastern Europe.

In these circumstances, the most effective response in the strategic and military realm to the new Russian expansion trend must come from the United States. Involvement of U.S. military forces in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea Region must have four major directions: regional security cooperation with the Russian Federation, increasing the presence of U.S. forces in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea Region, intelligence

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cooperation, and the support / assistance of the Eastern Europe countries in configuring, developing, equipping, and training military forces.

Regional security cooperation with the Russian Federation looks for development of common regional security objectives in the Black Sea region and build of trust and confidence by different actions as the deterrence of terrorism and piracy, counter proliferation, the traffic of humans, the maritime security, maritime surveillance, search and rescue etc. In the present there already works two naval initiatives in which Russia is a part Blackseafar and Black Sea Harmony, and that includes all the naval forces of countries from Black Sea. These projects can be updated and developed.

Increasing the presence of U.S. forces in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea looks for deterrence of any military threat or (or asymmetric one) in this region. It can be realized by development of U.S. facilities (bases, defensive systems), conducting of common training and combined or joint multinational/ regional exercises (like Black Sea Rotational Force series led by MARFOREUR), educational events (courses, academy, and educational exchanges).

Intelligence and surveillance cooperation looks for maintain the capability to achieve the indicators and warnings regarding any military action by surprise, as Crimea was. On the other hand, the internal security issue comes from the mitigation of the actions of extremist groups (ethnic, religious, paramilitary, armed groups). During initial stages of Ukraine crisis and Crimean unrest, the paramilitary forces and armed groups supported by Russian Special Purpose Forces took the initiative in upheavals.

The assistance of the Eastern Europe countries in configuring, developing, equipping, and training military forces looks for development of national military capabilities. The effects of economic and financial crisis determined these countries to reduce their military expenditures to the survival limit. As a result, the equipment, materials, and weapons systems acquisition has stopped determining the effects on units' combat power and overall capability to response to regional security challenges.

7. Conclusion

Although Russia considers legitimate the military intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, the actions prove the manifest intention of Russia to rebuild its sphere of influence through the military and strategic exploitation of frozen conflicts.

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