Russia’s Annexation of Crimea

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Capstone Paper
Spring 2015
University of San Diego
Master of Arts International Relations
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I. Introduction

In 2014 Russia broke the establishment of sovereign borders by resorting to military intervention in annexing an area of Ukraine known as Crimea. On Nov. 21, 2013 Ukrainian protesters took to the streets after President Yanukovych’s government announced plans to abandon EU's Eastern Partnership program that would strengthen ties with the European Union and instead sought closer cooperation with Moscow. In response to this action taken by the Ukraine government, on Dec. 17, 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Moscow would buy $15 billion worth of Ukrainian government bonds and allow for a price cut in Russian natural gas for Ukraine. These agreements ignited opposition in Ukraine and protests in the streets turned violent. On Feb. 18, 2014, clashes in the streets of Kiev left at least 26 people, including 10 police officers dead and hundreds injured. The violence began when protesters attacked police outside parliament for stalling constitutional changes to limit presidential powers. This resulted in concessions by President Yanukovych, who signed an agreement with opposition leaders to hold early elections, which diluted his powers and formed a caretaker government. However, many of the protesters still demanded his removal.

A few days later on Feb. 22 the Ukrainian Parliament voted to dismiss Yanukovych, and in response Pro-Russia protesters rallied in Crimea. While President Yanukovych denounced the coup, the Ukraine Parliament named Speaker Oleksander Turchynov as interim president and voted to ban Russian as the second official language. This resulted in a wave of anger in Russian-speaking regions in the east and in Crimea. On February 27th, pro-Russian gunmen seized key buildings in the Crimean capital, Simferopol, while unidentified gunmen in combat uniforms appeared outside Crimea's main airports. On March 1st Russia’s Parliament approved the use of force to protect Russian interests in Ukraine. Troops, under apparent Russian
command, took over Crimea without firing a shot. Within a week, Crimea’s Parliament declared that the region wanted to join Russia and held a vote of approval on March 16, 2014. This sequence of events ultimately concluded with President Putin signing a bill to absorb Crimea into the Russian Federation. That was later confirmed by a vote of Crimean citizens, with 97% of voters agreeing to Crimea's secession referendum on joining Russia. This vote has been condemned by the West as a sham due to Russian pressure in the area.¹

Domestic Motivations for the annexation of Crimea

Many experts now wonder what Russia’s motivation was in the use of annexation, which is thought to be an outdated practice by the international community. While Ukraine does not have many ties to the West, this is still a cause of concern to the international community in their ability to enforce the borders of sovereign states. In order to understand the use of annexation, it is necessary to examine the motivation of state behavior and the external factors that surround their actions. Examining Russia’s motivations for annexing Crimea can offer insight into what motivates state behavior in military actions. Understanding the Kremlin’s motivation and the international circumstances surrounding the annexation is key to comprehending the conflict between Russia and the West. This will also be useful in predicting Russia’s next steps and what the West could do about future Russian aggression and expansion.

Russian Nationalism

Many Russia specialists and regional experts argue that domestic factors motivated President Putin into military action, while international influences were the reasoning behind the timing. Specifically, such experts claim that Putin was driven by his desire to stoke national

pride and support for the Kremlin. This in turn helped raise support for Russia’s creation of the sphere of influence in the East.

In 2012, the economy stalled and allegations of voting corruption in the presidential and national elections had dramatically decreasing support for the Kremlin, to the lowest levels seen in 14 years.² When allegations that voter fraud had occurred in the Presidential election of 2012 then again in the 2012 parliament election “disapproval of voter fraud quickly morphed into discontent with Putin's return to the Kremlin. Public anger at a corrupt government, lead to riots in the streets and opposing political figures to speak up against the Russian President. Some opposition leaders even called for revolutionary change.”³ The protests that occurred in Russia were the largest since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but not enough to overthrow the Kremlin.

Putin was angered by the protests since he attributed the rioting Russian’s new stability and wealth to his rule. But Putin also feared protesting and the consequences it could have to his regime. In the wake of the "color revolutions" in Eastern Europe, especially the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Arab Spring, protests had been leading to the toppling of governments, the redistribution of wealth, and restructuring of governments and economies.⁴ In an effort to “mobilize his electoral base and discredit the opposition, Putin recast the United States as an enemy to Russia. Suddenly, state-controlled media portrayed the United States as fomenting unrest inside Russia.”⁵ The key for Putin was to create internal stability in Russia using the ideology of nationalism. Pride and satisfaction in Russia would secure Putin’s regime and allow his political-economic system to remain intact. In order to accomplish this, Putin

² An independent poll released in December 2013 by the Levada Center showed that approximately one-third of Russians dis approved of Putin’s policies—the lowest sup port numbers for Putin in fourteen years.
⁴ The state-controlled press began broadcasting messages of dangers that revolutions bring because he knew that his own people could follow the example set in the Middle East and Ukraine. Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
focused on “stirring up old-school anti-Western paranoia and imperial-style Russian nationalism.” Putin emphasized himself as a “last bastion of order and traditional values. He was convinced that liberalism was contagious and that Western morals and institutions presented a real danger to Russian society and the Russian state.” The Kremlin’s state-run media stressed the superiority of Russia along with importance of traditionalism and conservatism, which were closely held values that the West no longer represented.

The Kremlin needed to take action, to quell dissent and solidify Russian nationalism. Ukraine was not falling for the Kremlin’s propaganda about the threat of the West and was instead looking to the EU for freedom from an overbearing Russia. President Putin’s statements justified the seizure of Crimea with the need to protect Ukraine’s Russian population from the “fascist junta in Kiev and to bring historically Russian, ‘sacred’ territory back into the fold.” Russia had to stand by while their fellow Russians were denied the same rights as others in Eastern European States and the West never intervened to ensure equality. With many ethnic Russia’s still not considered citizens of their countries, President Putin was leery about where the Ukraine situation was going. When the new Ukrainian President, installed after Yanukovych’s overthrow, passed new laws eliminating Russian as an official language President Putin saw what had happened in the Baltics was taking place again. This time he would not sit idly by.

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9 Newly established governments in Eastern Europe took steps to exclude Russian citizens from their new states. For example; Russians living in Estonia and Latvia were not granted automatic citizenship after the Soviet Union collapsed, but instead, have had to take tests in their countries’ history and in the official state languages before becoming citizens. “Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians have refused to accept the terms of citizenship in Latvia and Estonia. As a result, they have been left with the demeaning legal status of ‘noncitizens,’ which deprives them of a number of rights, including the right to vote and run for public office.” Shuster, Simon. "Russia's Fifth Column." Time. Time Magazine, 4 Dec. 2014. Web. 22 Apr. 2015.
“In 2000, President Putin closed his first inaugural speech with the pledge that unifying Russians was his 'sacred duty'.”

For President Putin, it became time, in 2014, to ensure that Russians living outside of Russia’s borders are assured security. “Russia had taken a variety of steps to increase the Kremlin’s influence over the roughly 10 million ethnic Russians living in Eastern Europe.”

President Putin sent envoys of Russian politicians and well-known figures to rally Russians in the Baltic States to heighten Russian pride through public speeches and festivals held on their behalf. Through policy changes President Putin reinforced its military presence along its western border while completing steps to modernize its military to show these minority populations that Russia could protect them. The Kremlin also invested heavily in news networks in the region to ensure that Russian-speakers received the Kremlin’s support and Russian’s promise of protection. With a strongly allied Ukraine to Russia the Russian populations there were not a concern until the coup in 2014. Now the Russian population of Ukraine needed the same reassurance as other former Soviet Union States.

The push for protection of Russians in the near abroad progressed to a full annexation of Crimea in order to protect the rights of Russian-speakers in Ukraine. Putin stated that he made his final decision about a full annexation in Crimea after secret, undated, opinion polls showed 80% of Crimean’s favored joining Russia. This data gave Putin the push to take Crimea back into Russian control with public support since the Russian population has always felt that Crimea should have remained a part of Russia in the first place. Putin’s plan of protecting Russians in

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Crimea worked; the annexation raised support and nationalism within Russia and abroad and “his slouching approval rating skyrocketed to 80 percent.”¹³

**Sphere of Influence**

Russia viewed its action in Ukraine as an attempt to show the West that its influence in the East would be met with resistance from Russia. “Russia saw itself as lying outside the West, as part of a separate Eurasian civilization and geopolitical bloc that was free to make its own policies and standards, that did not have to match up to that in the U.S. and Europe.”¹⁴ This sphere of influence would be used to balance power in the international community against western hegemonic influence around the world. Experts argue that Russia was just advocating a multipolar world where nations have a right to create associations and international entities, like security alliances, and trade groups, among themselves that most importantly can be independent from the U.S. Some former Soviet republics along with Russia had willing agreed to create new forms of integration, “such as the Eurasian Economic Community, whose members include Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan, and possibly Armenia.”¹⁵

The European Union began to push into Russia’s post-Soviet neighborhood with “the so-called Eastern Partnership (EaP) beginning in 2009.”¹⁶ The EaP proposed offering six states- Armenia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine- a path to association agreements that would include Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs). For Russia, the problem with these association agreements was that the states would have to implement a substantial proportion of the European Union’s rules and regulations. These rules have “serious

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¹⁶ Ibid.
implications for the inherited post-Soviet political cultures that serve as a primary vehicle for Russian influence” while “DCFTAs would also likely reorient trade from the EaP states away from Russia and toward Europe.” In fact in order for Ukraine to become a part of EaP, Ukraine would have had to withdraw from the Eurasia Economic Union.

Ukraine plays an important part in Russia’s sphere of influence. For Russia loosing Crimea to Ukraine was out of a legal technicality that should not had been enforced. Crimea was only considered a part of Ukraine because while Ukraine was a part of the Russian Federation the government gave the state of Ukraine control of Crimea, not anticipating the break up in the Federation in the future. Russia had always resented loosing Crimea to Ukraine and hoped to reincorporate Crimea back into Russia. Russia hoped to create a security and trade alliances that both include Ukraine and Crimea. The Kremlin had long counted on Ukraine “as an essential component, perhaps the essential component, to its Eurasianist integration project.” While Ukraine was important to Russia’s plans due to its geographic location and ability to transport gas from Russia to Southeast Europe and the black sea region, there are many other reasons the Ukraine and specifically Crimea were important. For example, “military aviation remained a major area of cooperation between the Russian and Ukrainian governments and private enterprises.” Cooperation between Ukraine and Russia included the modernization and development of anti-tank missiles, short-range air defense systems, rifle sights and thermal imagers, and armor development. This was important as Russia had plans for modernizing their military capabilities by 2020.

Crimea in particular had strategic advantages for inclusion in this sphere of influence. For Russia, the inclusion of Crimea bolsters economics and politics in Russia and their alliances. Crimea provided vital access to the sea, since “Russia’s only guaranteed ports are on its north coast, all of which have been accessible only in the Arctic summer months.”\(^{20}\) Crimea also provided Russia with “control over potentially trillions of dollars of underwater energy resources in the Black Sea.”\(^ {21}\) The peninsula in addition to shielding the mouth of the Don River, which protects shipping routes between Russia, Turkey, and southeastern Europe, also housed naval ports and other military bases that had to be accessible to Russia.\(^ {22}\) For Russia, loosing Crimea to the West was not simply loosing trade to Europe, but loosing access to the ocean, bases, and trade routes which would not only hinder trade, but military operations. All of these aspects were key to have a Eurasia community in the East.

**What Is At Stake?**

Russia’s actions in Ukraine have brought into question the international community’s ability to enforce its laws and the priority of which laws are worth enforcement. Russia has now brought sovereign borders into question with its actions as well. Firm boundary lines for sovereign states historically were never established until the formation of an international community such as the UN to recognize states and their territories. Charters were enacted to protect territories from threats of annexation and promote a united world. In 1945, the international community came together to establish Article 2, Paragraph 4 of the United Nations Charter stating:

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\(^{21}\) Ibid.

All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.

This legislation established the idea of sovereign borders and protections of those within them.

Enforcing the new rules of border protection was rocky at first, but since the 1970s, military style annexations have mostly become a technique of the past. “Since the establishment of U.S. military power no one had the strength to counter U.S. weight in the international community” in order to carry out and succeed in an annexation.\(^{23}\) This does not take into account invasions or internal conflict, only formal annexations by one opposing country from another.

The international community is now facing a threat to its ability to enforce the laws it has set in place in the United Nations. With many countries from the West stating that Russia’s actions in Ukraine were a violation of Article Two, Russia is now testing the consequences of these violations. For the West their prestige in the international community is at stake. If the international community allows Russia to formally annex and continue aggression in Ukraine, this would set the stage for other countries to follow in suit, which could lead to other UN Charter violations.

For Russia, these actions have brought about resurgence in Russian pride and prestige that was lost after the Cold War. This was Russia’s chance to shift power away from a U.S. hegemon and have the East act as a countering power in the international community. Ukraine has remained a weak spot for Russia. Russia gave control over Crimea to Ukraine 1954 when Ukraine was still a part of the Russian Federation. After Russia’s loss in the Cold War Ukraine

\(^{23}\) The last known attempt of a violation of sovereignty was after the Iran–Iraq War in Kuwait. "As seen in the Kuwait annexation, the answer to motivations annexation seems simple to some international experts. It's a balance of power in the international field." In the early- and mid-1900s there was a void in hegemonic power with the world shifting to the west with the rise of U.S. hegemonic power. Read more at, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annexation.
became independent and Russia lost Crimea over technicalities. Crimea’s annexation back to Russia is particularly concerning, considering that Ukraine voluntarily gave up their nuclear capabilities to establish a sovereign border with Russia. Today, Ukraine needs to reestablish this border with Russia to ensure its sovereignty and abilities to choose their own associations in the international community. Continuation of the crisis in eastern Ukraine could in turn lead to a war Ukraine cannot win. Alternatively, it could lead to a truce with Russia to reconstruct Ukraine’s government and expand economic relations with Russia and Europe, but this will require military assistance from the West, which has not yet been given. Ukrainian independence is at stake and when this conflict ends, Ukraine could be a western ally through use of force or a state under the influence — or even a part of—Russia.

II. Why Annexation in 2014?

Experts are divided over the international influences that pushed Russia into annexing Crimea. Russian interests in the international community have always been downplayed or ignored force Russia into isolation from the West for a while. The question remains, what changed in 2014 that cause Russia to act with military aggression and protect their interests? On the one hand, experts on international relations tend to take a realist perspective, emphasizing that the threat of NATO expansion forced President Putin’s actions and motivated Russia in the decision to annex Crimea. These experts argue, that a strong aggressive NATO alliance converted buffer states into proxies of the West, which caused Russia to counter and push for a change in international power. On the other hand, many Russia specialists and regional experts stress that Russia acted because Putin perceived the international community to be weak and indecisive. These arguments respond that NATO had expanded, but has not gain any military
strength in their expansion to new members. That in fact, NATO had become weak in Europe and Western governments were not in agreement on many international issues. Therefore, Russia invaded to take advantage of the West’s apparent weakness in Europe. These distinct perspectives suggest very different state motivations, which lead to contrasting views as to what will be Russia’s next steps and how the West should respond.

The Threat of NATO Expansion

Many experts have offered opposing views to identify the external motivation for Russia annexing Crimea. Jack Matlock24, John J. Mearsheimer25, and Stephen Walt all propose that Western and NATO expansion was the motivation Russia needed to defend its sphere of influence. This theory looks predominantly at NATO expansion and the use of NATO to overturn domestic governments to achieve democracy and a West-leaning government. This practice has been useful to NATO in order to contain Russia. In 2014, Russia saw the promise of future membership to NATO for Ukraine and the new West-leaning Ukrainian government as a direct threat to Russian security interests. These experts have argued that the threat of NATO expansion was important to Russia because NATO does not adhere to its promises and international law in its expansion and military activities.

NATO expansion was promoted in the U.S. through many news stations and government foreign policies. Though News coverage and new policies the declaration of protection through NATO expansion was heard by those who wished to protect Eastern European States from Russian influence. Jeffery Mankoff argued that most Eastern European “émigrés” in the United

States strongly supported expansion, because they felt that countries such as Hungary, Poland, and the Baltics were in need of protection from an overbearing Russian influence. NATO expansion was seen as a way to ensure international security and promote Western ideals to ensure peace. Scholars and government officials, promoted NATO expansion in order to underpin the liberal institutional reforms in East-Central European countries, newly freed from the Soviet Union. This made sense due to the low rates of conflict between democracies in the world, especially those with West-leaning policies. Since the start of expansion of NATO the democratic peace theory has been criticized by many scholars as weak and recent conflicts between democratic states like the U.S. and Russia have backed this criticism. The NATO expanded into Eastern Europe to strengthen military defenses, but claim these actions are not against Russia or any other state. Russia has not bought this claim and fully believes that expansion is not for smaller developing countries in Eastern Europe who were ensured protection for their sovereignty, but a tactic of containment for Russia.

While security and defense are justifiable reasons for expansion, no shift in world power happens without an opposing pushback. The West claims NATO expanded for defensive reasons, but states on the opposite side of the NATO line interpreted NATO expansion as an aggressive threat to their interest. Expansion was an attempt by the West to take advantage of the East, mainly Russia, in its weakened state after the Cold War. Russia has had to endure three former Soviet Union States in the Baltics becoming NATO members along with Poland Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. After being accepted into NATO, the domestic and international policy in each state became West-leaning and Russian interests and trade took a back seat to that of the EU. Russia has managed to maintain influence

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26 This is known as the Democracy Peace Theory. Read more at [http://www.e-ir.info/2012/02/18/the-democratic-peace-theory/](http://www.e-ir.info/2012/02/18/the-democratic-peace-theory/).
in the area by having a heavy advantage in the energy sector. With Russia monopoly in supplying energy in the area Russia has maintained a foothold in NATO’s territory. Sergey Karaganov, a Russian political scientist, who advised both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, summarized Russia’s stance by stating that:

The West has been trying to act as a victor, while denying this position to Russia… avoiding direct annexations and contributions, but continuously limiting Russia’s freedom, spheres of influence and markets, while at the same time expanding the sphere of its own political and military interests through NATO expansion, and its political and economic pursuits through EU enlargement. 27

Since this statement Alexander Grushko, then Russia’s deputy foreign minister, stated that, “Georgia’s and Ukraine’s membership in the alliance is a huge strategic mistake which would have most serious consequences for pan-European security.” 28 Russian President Putin has also maintained that admittance of those two countries into NATO would represent a “direct threat” to Russia.

Western experts, like Jack Matlock, argued that Putin came to power in 2000 by displaying a “pro-Western orientation,” which proved that the Kremlin’s new discontent and isolation from the West had to be a result of Western actions. Such actions, according to experts were: NATO expansion, plans for American bases in the Baltics and Balkans, withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and overt participation in the ‘color revolutions’ in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. 29 All these actions concluded with talks of adding Georgia and Ukraine to NATO, which the Kremlin sated would not be tolerated. Experts, such as Kennan,

predicted that NATO expansion would provoke a crisis, but the proponents of Western expansion did not heed the constant warnings by the Kremlin.

The United States’ use of “military intervention and regime change coupled with the perpetuation of a NATO-centric European security order” have created hostility towards the United States among Russian officials that goes beyond disagreements about economics and politics.\(^{30}\) Experts that blame NATO expansion for Russia’s annexation of Crimea, attribute Russian aggression against the West to the hostility created by Western countries interfering in the sovereign governments. This can been seen in regime changes in Libya, Iraq, Yugoslavia, and the one attempted in Syria. Foreign policy in states undergoing regime change had frequently resulted in a decrease in trade and influence for Russia and the implementation of polices that greatly favored the West.

The solution offered by experts was the post Cold-War tactic of containment. Potential NATO expansion or at least aid for Georgia and Ukraine to form a new barrier for containment that was once provided by Germany was critical in the Ukraine Crisis. According to Alexander Motyl, “containment policy is constraining Russia’s ability to use energy as a weapon. Halting the building of the South Stream pipeline, reducing Europe’s dependence on Russian oil and gas, and helping Ukraine reform its energy sector will be key.”\(^{31}\) By pushing democracy in Eastern Europe in order to bring states bordering Russia into the Western sphere of influence. Former U.S. ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul stated:

> Authoritarian Russia, affected by imperial complexes and cave-dweller anti-Americanism, is issuing an unprecedented challenge to the world order through the annexation of the Crimea that should prompt a unanimous and

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tough response from all civilized humanity, effectively returning to containment. 32

This would likely prompt more NATO expansion and the spread of Western ideals to ensure that Russia cannot challenge the world order and continue to dominate former Soviet Union States like the Baltics, and Eastern Europe. This stance does ignore the numerous American breaches of international law and singling out Russian actions as anachronistic, but many American policy makers were quick to ignore or justify American’s actions while condoning those of Russia.

**Weak and Indecisive Europe**

Another view proposed by experts, like Michael Auslin and Luke Coffey, was that if NATO and the EU had been expanding and tipping the power scale in their favor, what consequently made Russia think it could get away with its actions in Ukraine? Their answer was that, while “on paper” NATO was expanding, gaining more territories, and setting up new agreements, NATO did not prove to be a “legitimate threat” to Russia. From the view of Russia NATO had stretched itself too thin, taking on more territory than it could manage and did not improve their military capabilities to handle all their responsibilities. For Russia, the West appeared weak and indecisive, due to military cut backs and in action with international crisis in the early 2000s, thus creating a vacuum of power for Russia to exploit.

Since 2011, the West has focused North Africa and the Middle East to combat terrorism and extremism, while European issues have been displaced into the background. Western interests could not extend themselves much further to protect every corner of the world. The United States alone “had cut troop strength in Europe from several hundred thousand at the end

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of the Cold War to approximately 64,000." Along with cut backs in troops, bases and other installments have been closed and another two in Germany that were planned in 2013 were delayed, due to Russia’s actions in Ukraine. The U.S. had to exhibit respect to the sovereignty of Europe and could not perform military operations without EU or NATO consent, which became harder to achieve and lead to unilateral action by the US outside of NATO outside of Europe.

In 2012, expert Luke Coffey predicted that the U.S. military presence in Europe “deters adversaries, strengthens allies, and protects U.S. interests” and that “reducing this capability would only make America and NATO weaker on the world stage.” He also added that cuts in the U.S. military in Europe would “send the wrong signal about America’s commitment to transatlantic security and will embolden U.S. adversaries in the Euro–Atlantic region.” His prediction was accurate since military aggression from Russia coincided with a reduction in in U.S. troops in Europe. The reduction of troops and bases was taken as a weakening of the United States commitment to the security of Europe, which emboldened opportunists like Putin.

While the U.S. had been pulling out of Europe, countries within Europe had not stepped up to increase security. NATO had not deployed bases and hardware eastward in Europe and NATO defense spending has declined. Projected NATO budgets in 2015 showed that six countries reduced their defense spending despite not meeting the required 2% of GDP in the years before. These countries failed to meet the new standard set in September 2014 “with the less ambitious goal that those countries that were not meeting the target should halt any decline in defense expenditure.” Two of the biggest spenders in defense, the U.K. and Germany,

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35 Ibid.
reduced their spending, as they had been since 2013, while Britain also “reduced the size of its regular army.”  All in all, Central and Western Europe reduced their defense spending by 6.5%, while Russia strategically increased theirs. In 2013, Russia’s military budget was 91 million dollars and had been increasing it since. The UK, which is the second biggest funder of NATO, spent 91 billion dollars that same year, but has since been decreasing their funding. The only two countries to meet the 2% standard in 2015 were Estonia, and the U.S. Interestingly the increased spending in NATO was by the countries most affected or worried by the aggressive military actions of Russia, including Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands Norway and Romania. All these states with the exception of the Netherlands have borders with or were once subject to Russian rule and worried about Russia increasing its influence in their country. These countries and others close to Russia, due to past affiliation and close proximity, realized their defense spending had been too lax and an increase in defense was needed to ensure security.

Eastern European countries were not the only ones to take notice of the lax spending. President Putin was also taking notice and making a strategic plan while cooperating with the West’s plan to include Russia in international alliances. From President Putin’s point of view, “Russia was invited to join both the Council of Europe and the elite Group of Seven Nations in the 1990s and subsequently the U.S. Government established Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with Russia.” This showed the West’s commitment to work together with Russia, which meant the West no longer considered Russia a threat to European security. This resulted in a change of tactics by the West to show support for Russia. Some of these tactics were

39 Flight MH17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was travelling over the conflict-hit region when it hit by a missile. A total of 283 passengers were killed in the crash. Malaysia Airlines' passenger list shows Flight MH17 was carrying 193 Dutch nationals making the Dutch government more involved in the Ukraine conflict.
dismantling stations in Europe, setting aside the missile-defense agreements with Poland and the Czech Republic, and decreasing troops so that in 2015 only around 70,000 U.S. military personnel were stationed in Europe. Too add to the decreased U.S. presence in Europe, the 2011 air campaign in Libya also demonstrated Europe’s military weakness. “What started off as a French–U.K. military operation had to be quickly absorbed into a NATO operation because Europe did not have the political will or military capability to see the mission through to completion.”^41 These actions showed vulnerability toward Russia and deemphasized the strength of European defense while trying to incorporate Russia to avoid an exploitation of this weakness.^42

The idea of an indecisive NATO was cemented into the Russian consciousness by the failure of the West to intervene in security matters that were not a direct threat to the West. Russia did not fail to notice states violating international law and experiencing civil unrest that were not aided by either NATO or the EU. “While perceptions of Western resolve or weakness do not necessarily create conditions of instability by themselves, their real danger is that they make aggressive opportunism seem a more attractive path for revanchists like Putin.”^43 The West’s military cuts and inaction were the green-light Putin was waiting for in order to turn the tide of international power back to Russia. With inaction from the West in “the 2008 Georgian invasion, East and South China Sea territorial disputes, Pyongyang’s nuclear provocations, and Syria’s civil war have set the stage for future opportunism.”^44 When the West did not act in response to Syria’s use of chemical weapons, President Putin realized the Ukraine revolution

^43 Ibid.
^44 Ibid.
would be the time to regain power in the region. Ukraine was not a member of NATO, so the West did not have to act on Ukraine’s behalf.

This argument is the counter to an expanded, strengthened NATO, by assuming that shrunken budgets and inaction by NATO showed weakness that Russia was able to exploit. The abated security of the West in Europe had created a power vacuum that Russia intended to fill by taking back the territories that it lost due to the fall of the Soviet Union. Russia hoped to strengthen Russian power and shift the power dynamics away from a hegemonic U.S. supported by the EU. This theory supports the idea that Putin is an opportunist that would expand Russian influence as long as the West remained divided. According to this theory, “Putin’s neo-imperial ideology and standing as Russia’s all-powerful leader require him to gather former imperial territories.”45 The West needs to focus on military and security diplomacy weaknesses and improve upon them to have the ability to militarily contain Russia from expanding Putin’s sphere of influence.

III. Which Argument is Stronger?

Russia acted in Crimea to protect their sphere of influence and promote Russian nationalism and support for Putin’s regime. The question remains why did Putin chose to act on these interests in 2014 with Crimea? Two differing arguments have been made, one of NATO expansion, as a threat to Russia and the other was a weakening NATO in Europe. The NATO expansion argument relies on NATO gathering strength through adding states into its alliance. A look at NATO expansion throughout Europe shows that over time NATO has grown in stages and has doubled the land it covers (see Table 1).

Through expansion NATO had doubled in size and this would lead to the assumption that its strength and threat to Russia had as well. NATO expansion had actually made the promise of guarding NATO members against external threats more complicated. These complications are that “an expanded NATO has more area to defend, static resources to defend it with, and will require a major modernization program to integrate outdated Soviet trained militaries.” Rather than strengthen NATO, its expansion added problems to NATO’s already strained budget. NATO cannot keep up with present demands in bringing new member’s subpar forces up-to-date, while increasing the amount of territory it has to defend. With added aggression from Russia, these demands will only increase.

NATO has commitments around the globe and to its members. In order to fulfill these commitments, large quantities of money are required. NATO still spends 10 times that of Russia in military expenditures. However, when broken apart by country, Russia outspends every

European State. In fact, “13 out of the 20 fastest declining defense budgets between 2012 and 2014 were NATO members”47. Almost none of Europe’s members have reached the 2% GDP requirement for NATO funding. Since 2013, two of the biggest European contributors to NATO, the U.K. and Greece, had reduced their spending. In fact, in 2014, only the United States and Estonia met the 2% threshold. Europe’s military spending average had remained well below the 2% GDP threshold, while Russia’s had remained well above this requirement in its own military spending (see Table 2).

**Table 2 Military Expenditure By Country**

![Military Expenditure By Country Graph](image)

Source: World Bank Composed by: Amanda Strobel

Independent of U.S. defense spending, the 27 other NATO countries spent $318.7 billion on defense. In 2014, Russia spent $84.9 billion on military expenditures and was expected to increase this to $92 billion in 2015. This was almost 1/3 of Europe’s military budget in one country. The small budgets of Europe are a reflection of Europe’s reluctance to become engaged

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in another war. After two World Wars ripped Europe apart, the EU is not trying to provoke more death and destruction in this area. Russia spent 4.1% of its GDP on its military in 2014, exceeding that of the U.S. for the first time in over a decade (see Table 3). The dramatic increase is likely due in part to Russia's stated plans to invest more than $700 billion to modernize its weapons system by 2020. If these numbers keep increasing downward for Europe and increasing for Russia over time this will become a larger issue for NATO.

**Table 3 Military Expenditures By NATO Averages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>NATO (Europe Average)</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>NATO (Average)</th>
<th>Russia</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
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<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>5.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
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<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: World Bank

Composed by: Amanda Strobel

Table 3 also shows that NATO’s average military expenditures, without the United State’s assistance, is dramatically lower than that of the average expenditures, including U.S. funding. Over time, both NATO and the U.S.’s military budgets decreased, showing the strong connection between the U.S. military budget and NATO’s budget. The decrease in U.S. military funding also reflects the U.S. stance that it will no longer foot-the-bill when it comes to NATO.

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spending. The United States had been providing over 70% of the NATO budget (see Table 4). The United States remained the biggest spender in NATO with a budget of 538 billion dollars while the next highest country, the United Kingdom, only spent 55 billion in 2014. Even with the United States covering a majority of the NATO budget, it had dropped by $93 billion from 2012 to 2014. NATO is run by U.S. funding and despite cuts to the budget in hopes to get European States to step up spending both Europe and the United States know this will not happen.

**Table 4 NATO Expenditure (in billions of $)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Expenditure (in billions of $)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>582.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>59.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>49.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>32.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>9.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>7.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>5.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>2.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>0.60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Using military budgets as an indicator of military strength, Russia outweighed all of Europe in its capabilities. With Europe’s strong reliance on the United States for security U.S. military capabilities in Europe was the only threat to Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The trouble with the reliance on U.S. troops and stations in Europe was withdrawal of troops from Europe to be stationed in conflict zones elsewhere. The rise of terrorism in the Middle East and North
Africa has made those regions a greater priority to U.S. security. This has resulted in a transfer of U.S. troops formerly stationed in Europe to the Middle East (see Table 5). By 2014, the Middle East had more than double the number of U.S. troops stationed there compared to Europe. Moreover, because of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, U.S. troops stationed in Europe have been on standby to deploy to other hot spots, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, or North Africa. In the eyes of Russia, such expansive U.S. commitments in the Middle East and North Africa make Eastern European countries appear to be more vulnerable targets for military aggression.

Table 5 U.S. Troops Abroad

![Chart showing U.S. troops abroad by region]

When a comparison of troops and military equipment is made, troops from Eastern European NATO members are still not up to par with fending off possible combatants like Russia. Poland had the largest military capabilities out of the Eastern Europe NATO members and its troops only amounted to 99,300, while Russia had 845,000 troops (see Table 6). The Baltic States were severely lacking in troops, tanks, and aircrafts that would be easy to overcome.
without the help of NATO’s stronger members. This leaves Eastern and Central European NATO members only with the promise of protection from stronger NATO members. These promises, once comforting, have become a cause of concern due to recent inaction by NATO and the United States in international concerns.

Table 6 Military Strength of Eastern Europe

![Table 6 Military Strength of Eastern Europe](image)


Until, the West becomes a united voice in the international community making decisions to act quickly and effectively there is an opportunity for states to advance their interests at the expense of the West. Europe’s reliance on the United State’s and unilateral action by the U.S. has led to disagreements among members on how NATO should function, resulting in a failure to act in crises. Disagreements among the West, like actions to be taken in Syria and how to handle Greece’s failing economy, resulted in a standstill. With inaction from the West in “the 2008 Georgian invasion, East and South China Sea territorial disputes, Pyongyang’s nuclear

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provocations, and Syria’s civil war” the stage was set for Russia to test the West’s boundaries.\textsuperscript{50}

With Eastern States relying on U.S. and Western Europe for support, a divided and indecisive alliance leaves them weak and vulnerable to combative states, especially Russia. Eastern European states hope that an agreement can be made and quickly if their security is ever called into question.

Adding to an indecisive NATO is their weakness due to a decline in funding. The United State’s budget cuts to military expenditures, negatively affected the funding for NATO and left Eastern Europe’s militaries under developed and vulnerable to aggression. With so many threats to the West, the United States and Western Europe have to decide how best to use NATO to maintain the status quo in the international community or have their weaknesses exploited by those seeking to shift power dynamics in the international community. Analysis of the data available shows that NATO was not growing stronger due to NATO expansion. Russia chose to act on its interests in Ukraine in 2014 due to NATO weakness in Europe and will continue to do so as long as these weaknesses persist and NATO cannot devote its full attention to Russia.

\textbf{IV. Conclusion}

In March 2014, Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine. The annexation improved President Putin’s approval ratings and instilled Russian pride in the public through a display of power against the West’s international domination. NATO had promised Ukraine entry into NATO back in 2008, but was not in a hurry to fulfill this promise. After the Ukrainian uprising and subsequent overthrow of the Ukrainian government, the West’s influence in Ukraine steadily grew. Russian President Putin was concerned that the West would use Ukraine to establish a

presence in Russia’s sphere of influence. Ukraine was already a part of the Eurasian Economic Union, which the West was forcing them to withdraw from, in order to join the EU trade association agreement. On top of Russian influence being topple in Ukraine, the new Ukrainian government began discriminating against Russia-speaking citizens. Putin took advantage of the ethic rift in Ukraine to bolster Russian pride both domestically and abroad and helped solidify his rule in Russia.

Some experts attributed Russia’s resort to military action in 2014 as a confrontation against a threatening NATO that was moving into Russia’s Eastern bloc. An aggressive move by Russia against NATO’s significantly larger military budget and capabilities would have been a counter intuitive move to a very strategically minded Kremlin. If NATO had intended to include and protect Ukraine, Russia would have had no chance in annexing Crimea. Putin also knew that a unified and focused NATO would have been able to squash any chance of expansion and solidification of its sphere of influence.

After looking at the date, Russia did not see a threatening NATO on its borders nor did it make a desperate step to solidify what it could of its sphere of influence. With Europe’s decreased military budgets and the United States occupied in the Middle East, Eastern Europe was vulnerable to Russian advances. This made the move of annexation in Crimea an easy act for Russia with little punishment resulting from the West. Ukraine was not a member of NATO therefore, there was no guarantee of protection forcing Europe to respond and come to Ukraine’s aid. Domestic factors motivated Russia to act within the Ukraine, but it was the perceived weaknesses that NATO showed to Russia that ultimately gave them the opportunity to fight back in 2014. If these weaknesses were presented earlier on, then aggression from Russia in response to NATO expansion would have been sooner.
Based on the theory that Russia took advantage of a power vacuum in Europe, experts can conclude that Russia used a realist perspective to try and shift the power balance in the international community. Russia has been preparing for this chance by increasing their military budget and modernizing their forces in order to regain its place in the international community. Putin being an opportunist saw a chance to shift power away from the hegemonic U.S. and sized it. While Russia is an opportunist, it is also very strategic and picked its target for annexation very carefully, knowing this could be the only opportunity that presented itself, depending on the West’s reaction. Crimea and Ukraine have an important role to play in Russia’s sphere of influence and was worth the risk of further isolation. If the West’s response to the annexation was not a strong enough deterrent, more military aggression from Russia could be expected. These conditions have left the rest of the eastern European states worried about their own state sovereignty and if their state would be worth the risk of a western confrontation with Russia, regardless of their NATO membership.

Therefore, the West can no longer trust in any past agreements made with Russia to ensure cooperation. The annexation of Crimea is just a small action in the bigger conflict between Russia and the West. These powers will always be competing for power in the international community using soft power and influence in other states as proxy conflicts to settle their dispute. The United States cannot continue to allow NATO to decrease its military budgets and capabilities. The United States started enforcing their new stance by lowering their own funding to NATO in hopes of other members making up the difference. Europe will need to step up and solidify their allegiance to NATO by investing in European security. Europe also needs to address the weaknesses that Russia is exploiting in order to keep NATO intact and address their policies in Eastern Europe to ensure that state sovereignty is never again called into question. If
not, the West must be willing to allow the Eastern Bloc to have its own independent bloc and work with them to establish international security.
V. Bibliography


