

The military consequences of the annexation of Crimea

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Crimea's absorption by Russia changes the current balance of forces in the Black Sea. In the regional dimension, the influence of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation will increase, and the technical modernisation and expansion of the Russian Black Sea Fleet will be easier. The annexation of Crimea will also bring measurable savings to the Russian ministry of defence, associated with the cessation of payment of the rental fee. For Ukraine, the loss of Crimea represents a significant depletion of its military potential, and in the short term, the almost complete elimination of the Ukrainian fleet. After the highly probable takeover of part of the Ukrainian Navy, the Russian Black Sea Fleet will outpace the Turkish fleet in the Black Sea, becoming a major military power in the basin. Given the modernisation plans, then by the end of this decade, Russia could gain the advantage over the combined potential of all the NATO members on the Black Sea.

Consequences for Russia

Crimea's acquisition significantly increases the operational capabilities and potential of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Russia will have full freedom in terms of its size and distribution (including new bases), modernisation and expansion throughout the peninsula. So far, it had been limited by the Russian-Ukrainian agreement of 1997, which regulated the stationing of units of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine. The Black Sea Fleet could only carry out repairs on ships without Ukrainian consent, and its land component could not exceed 2000 (at present there are 22,000 soldiers in Crimea). In the near future, the takeover of the remaining Ukrainian military infrastructure and equipment in Crimea (mainly ships) will make the Black Sea Fleet the undisputed principal military power in the Black Sea.

The Russian Ministry of Defence will save on leasing fees. So far, Moscow had been paying Ukraine \$97 million a year for stationing the Black Sea Fleet on the peninsula (from 2017 this amount was to have risen to \$100 million). The newly released funds will allow Russia to maintain an increased military presence. and will most likely be used for this purpose.

Consequences for Ukraine

About 50 sites belonging to the Armed Forces of Ukraine are located in Crimea. At least 30 of them (as of 19 March) have not yet been taken over, but they are blocked by Russian soldiers and local formations, the so-called Crimea Self-Defence. Regular, sustained attempts are being made to take them over. The same applies to the remaining 57 vessels

of the Ukrainian Navy based on the peninsula. Kyiv will probably insist on their units remaining at their bases; Simferopol and Moscow will demand the evacuation of the Ukrainian personnel, leaving their arms and military equipment behind. It is assumed that the transfer of these objects to Russia – by peaceful means or otherwise – is just a matter of time. It cannot be ruled out that if Ukrainian sailors are forced to leave without their ships, they will sink them, making their use at least temporarily impossible, and impeding the movement of other units in the Archer's Bay (*Streletskaya Balka*) in Sevastopol and on the Donuzlav lake near Yevpatoria, the major bases of the Ukrainian fleet.

The annexation of Crimea has the potential to seriously damage the Armed Forces of Ukraine. They will *de facto* have lost almost their entire navy (of the major units outside Crimea, only the frigate *Hetman Sahaidachny* remains) and about 20 percent of their potential air forces and air defence (the air fighter brigade and 3 rocket regiments stationed in Crimea have been deprived in recent weeks of their ability to operate; most of their equipment was taken over by Russian troops or destroyed). Kyiv will probably only manage to evacuate the soldiers (in the initial phase of the conflict there were 15,000 in Crimea, a small number of whom have gone over to the Russian side), who are the elite of the Ukrainian army in terms of training (most Ukrainian units in Crimea are part of the so-called Rapid Response Allied Forces).

The regional consequences

Crimea joining Russia fundamentally changes the military situation in the Black Sea. This will primarily be due to the effective elimination of the Ukrainian Navy, the third largest in the region in terms of military capabilities. Even if Kyiv attempted to restore the fleet, it would be deprived of its main bases (Sevastopol, the Donuzlav lake), and its operational capabilities would also be reduced (its base in Odessa would be relatively easy to block from Crimea).

Only in the long run will we be able to assess how important the increase in power and possibilities for the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation is. Given the Black Sea Fleet's current freedom to operate from Crimea, this will mainly be quantitative growth in the near future, associated with the acquisition of infrastructure and equipment from the Ukrainian army, and the possibility to deploy any number and category of forces on the peninsula. However, Russia's increasing military potential will in the first instance be decided by the progress made in implementing the State Programme of Armaments by the year 2020. According to this plan, the Black Sea Fleet is to be almost entirely re-armed, in order to receive six new frigates and six submarines; five frigates and four submarines are now in various stages of construction, the first units of both categories are likely to come into service this year, in accordance with the plan. Only re-armament will change the balance of forces in the Black Sea, and thus to a *de facto* state of relative balance in the military capabilities of NATO's Black Sea members (Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria) and Russia (as of now, the Russian Black Sea Fleet was inferior in potential to the combined fleets of the above-mentioned countries). However, the lack of any plans to modernise the Bulgarian and Romanian fleets, and the ongoing plans for modernising the Turkish fleet, indicate that by the end of the decade Russia will obtain a definite advantage in the Black Sea in terms of combat capabilities.