



Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine

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This report assesses the annexation of Crimea by Russia (February–March 2014) and the early phases of political mobilization and combat operations in Eastern Ukraine (late February–late May 2014). It examines Russia's approach, draws inferences from Moscow's intentions, and evaluates the likelihood of such methods being used again elsewhere.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS



- Was Russia successful in its operations to annex Crimea and foment an insurgency in Eastern Ukraine?
- What did Russia hope to accomplish by its actions?
- Is it possible to infer military and political objectives from the operations?
- Are these reproducible events, a possible model of operations, or were the circumstances and conditions unique?
- What can we glean from the potential desire of Moscow to replicate a similar course of events elsewhere?
- Did the combat, social-mobilization, and information-warfare aspects of these operations appear planned or improvised?
- What lessons about Russia's strategy and doctrine can we take away from the Ukrainian experience?

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KEY FINDINGS



Russia's Operation to Annex Crimea Represented Decisive and Competent Use of Military Force in Pursuit of Political Ends

- Russia was able to seize the territory of a neighboring state with speed and mobility.
- The political maneuvering on the peninsula during the invasion suggests that it may have been launched without a predetermined political outcome in mind.
- Russia likely sought to seize Crimea, and then evaluated its political options depending in part on how the intervention was received at home and abroad.

Russia's Operations in Crimea Benefited from a Series of Highly Favorable Circumstances That Makes It Difficult to Replicate

- These included political, historical, geographical, linguistic, and military advantages in the region that have only partial analogues elsewhere in the former Soviet republics.
- The confined geography of the peninsula, the proximity of Crimea to Russia, and its existence as a separate political unit within Ukraine gave Russia leverage.
- Russia's Black Sea Fleet was nearby, with legitimate transit routes that could be leveraged for a covert operation.

Russian Leaders Are Likely to Consider Eastern Ukraine to Be a Strategic Success but an Unsuccessful Operation

- Russia's efforts in Eastern Ukraine proved to be a series of improvisations in response to resistance and friction when the initial political warfare effort foundered.
- The lessons of Eastern Ukraine are rather mixed, demonstrating the limits of low-cost asymmetrical approaches even against a relatively weak and vulnerable state.
- Russia achieved its primary objectives but at a much higher cost than desired and through a fitful cycle of adaptation.