

## Russia's Road to the Middle East

*Will Russia someday become the leading superpower of Eurasia? Would this leadership reshape the balance of power in Eurasia and eventually alter geopolitical outcomes in the Middle East?*

Black Sea waters presented some difficulties for the ancient Mediterranean Greeks who navigated what poetically came to be called the *Pontos Axeinos*—the Inhospitable Sea.

Yet, despite the unpredictability of this ancient body of water for ancient seafarers the surrounding coast of the Black Sea became a stopping point for many ancient tribes and peoples that continued to move northward and westward across Central Asia and Asia Minor into Eastern Europe.

Some of whom included the Thracians, Cimmerians, Scythians and later the Mycenaeans, Greeks and Sarmatians.

Some of whom left a lasting influence in the region of the Black Sea.

By the 8<sup>th</sup> century the Black Sea region fell largely under the control of the Cimmerians who were later pushed by the Scythians farther into Asia Minor and expectedly northward beyond the Pontic steppes into those lands that are now within the bounds of modern-day Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation.

However, even though the Scythians had pushed many of the Cimmerian tribes out of this region of the Black Sea there still

remained a remnant of Cimmerians in Crimea, particularly in the narrow lands bordering the Strait of Kerch. This narrow seaway links the Black Sea with the northern Sea of Azov, and the Greeks who sailed this waterway called it the Strait of the Cimmerian Bosphorus, which is situated between the Taman and Crimean peninsulas within the current bounds of the Russian Federation. (The Romans called it the *Cimmerianus Bosporus*.)

Notably, these western migrations of the Cimmerians and Scythians coincided with the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the eventual overthrow of Samaria in northern Israel, when many Samaritan-Israelites were deported into lands that buffered the Assyrian Empire, mostly north and east of Babylon. Nearly a century later, while the Neo-Assyrians continued to be the dominant empire in Mesopotamia and the Middle East, the Black Sea region began to experience renewed Greek explorations that led to additional settlements along the northern and eastern coastal areas of the Black Sea.

In this period the Greeks also established settlements along the Cimmerian Bosphorus, and of particular importance to Greek trade was the city of Panticapaeum (modern Kerch), which was founded by the Milesian Greeks. This important city for trade later became an Athenian protectorate and was ruled for a time by the Archaeanactid dynasty (480–438 BCE), which laid the foundation for

a future Bosphoran state that enveloped the Strait of the Cimmerian Bosphorus.

Then, in 438/437 BCE a general and Thracian mercenary named Spartocus I came to power in the city of Panticapaeum and established a dynasty (Spartocid) that would generally mark the beginning of the independent Kingdom of the Cimmerian Bosphorus. Then a little more than a century later the Cimmerian Bosphorus, and the land of Crimea, was swallowed up by the empire of Alexander the Great as the Greeks marched through the lands that would later become part of the regional Seleucid Empire and the later Pontic Kingdom. Noting that the latter kingdom was a Hellenistic state of Persian origin and a kingdom that would eventually hold sway over the Cimmerian Bosphorus and Crimea until the coming of the Romans in the first century AD. (The Black Sea was still an Athenian sea in the time of Spartocus I.)

By the 15<sup>th</sup> century part of the Black Sea region and Crimea became a Turkic vassal state of the Ottoman Empire, and it remained as such until the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Crimean khanate was annexed into the Russian Empire in April of 1783 by the Russian monarch, Catherine the Great. (The Crimean kingdom was one of the longest lasting republics of the Roman Empire as well the one of the longest lasting khanates of the Ottoman Empire.)

Thus, Crimea remained under Russian control from the time of Catherine the Great until it was transferred to become a territory of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in

1954.

However, the reasons for this transfer of territory remain uncertain, but speculation has it that Nikita Krushchev did this for the sake of unifying the “Russians and Ukrainians” and to continue the “great and indissoluble friendship” that supposedly existed between the Ukrainians and Russians. Creating, then, an historical and political sticking point for a second annexation of Crimea that took place in 2014, a sticking point that became quite apparent in the referendum that voted Crimea back under the Russian Federation. (We can say with some certainty that Russia has no intentions of relinquishing Crimea back to Ukraine.)

Consequently, because of the nature of Russia’s military occupation of Crimea, and the continuing dispute offered by Ukraine, the peoples referendum and the subsequent annexation of Crimea by Russia has been regarded as “illegal” by the United Nations, and by the European Union, and by the NATO alliance and obviously by the current government of Ukraine.

Giving us then two additional sticking points to consider regarding any solutions to the annexation of Crimea.

The first is the long-range consequence of the annexation because it further divided NATO and Russia politically, and it upped the stakes for the geopolitical and military posturing that continues between the alliance and the Russian Federation. The second is the long history of Russia’s embattled involvement with Crimea—and the same could be said of Ukraine—because it

sensitizes the geopolitical issues that surround the annexation of Crimea.

Bringing us then to further consider the influence of history in resolving the geopolitical issue that is Crimea.

For we cannot forget that Crimea was once the final battlefield of the Crimean War that brought Britain, France, Turkey and Sardinia against Russia. This war began over religious differences and problems related to Christian access to holy sites in Jerusalem, and the spark that ignited this war was the riots that broke out in Bethlehem, which prompted Tsar Nicholas I—who blamed the Turks—to intervene in Palestine.

Also, the history of Russia is in large measure the history of Ukraine because the city of Kyiv is considered to be the “mother of all Russian cities,” and therefore it will always remain of geopolitical significance to Russia, because having Ukraine under wing means “empire” for the Russian Federation.

Thus, we could say that the dispute over Crimea is a dispute over common ground historically for both Russia and Ukraine, and this common ground touches the histories of the Greeks and Persians, particularly so after the conquests of Alexander the Great.

What then could we expect in the future regarding Russia, Ukraine and the geopolitical contest over Crimea?

We would have to think that the annexation of Crimea was a spark that reignited the belief in a Russian Empire in Eurasia, and such an empire would be incomplete apart from Ukraine and also Belarus, even though the government of

Ukraine is currently showing overtures to NATO.

Meaning that at this point nothing is settled about the future of Ukraine.

Also, it would be difficult to accept that NATO and the European Union would be able to successfully integrate a currently struggling Ukraine into its military and political sphere, only for Ukraine to become a political and military extension of Western Europe that borders on the Russian Federation.

In the end, we would have to think that NATO and the European Union will have to make a deal with Russia over the future of Ukraine, and in this deal the cards will expectedly fall in favor of Russia.

Bolstering Russia's increasing influence and power in Eurasia.

We could also expect to see the Russian Federation increasing its involvement in the Balkans, where north meets south, and we could also expect that Russia will show a more concerned interest in its outlet to the Mediterranean Sea.

Eventually, however, we could expect to see Russia becoming a major political player in Middle East affairs, particularly in Palestine, because like the United States and the European Union, we see that Russia too has actively signed on to the United Nations mandate to implement a “two-state” solution in Palestine. 