



## Strengthening Military and Historical Claims to Crimea

**OE Watch Commentary:** The Kremlin continues to consolidate its control over the Crimean Peninsula. Besides the continued construction of a rail/road bridge from mainland Russia to Crimea and other infrastructure projects (power stations, housing, roads), the Kremlin has also significantly strengthened its military presence on the peninsula. For instance, as the first excerpt from the official news agency TASS points out, Russia has recently deployed the advanced S-400 air defense system to Crimea which will soon be operational. Some Russians now refer to Crimea as their “permanent Black Sea aircraft carrier.”

The Kremlin is also strengthening its historical claim to Crimea. The second excerpt from the official Kremlin website describes a recent ceremony where President Putin unveiled a new statue in Crimea dedicated to Tsar Alexander III. Just as Crimea belonged to Russia under the Tsarist regime (indeed, Alexander III passed away while living in Crimea), so today, according to the Kremlin’s logic, the peninsula has returned to its rightful (Russian) ownership. In his remarks at the ceremony, President Putin made clear that Russia enjoys solid historical claims to Crimea, adding that “Alexander III loved Russia and believed in it, and by unveiling this monument today we pay tribute to his deeds, achievements and merits, we show our respect for the continuous history of our country, for the people of all ranks and social classes who earnestly served the Fatherland.” From the Kremlin perspective (which is shared by a large majority of the population of the Russian Federation), Crimea belongs to Russia.

Perhaps drawing a comparison to his own reign, President Putin described many of the achievements attributed to Tsar Alexander III. Like this distant tsar who “ensured the growth of Russia’s influence and authority in the world,” so today’s Kremlin-sponsored media continually portray Putin as the leader who has restored Russian greatness after the humiliations of the 1990s. Regaining control of Crimea has been the top achievement of Putin’s latest term as president. And just as military modernization was a major focus under Alexander III, so today, under President Putin, the Russian military continues to strengthen its combat capabilities.

The West imposed various economic sanctions upon Russia after its annexation of Crimea and armed aggression against Ukraine, hoping that financial burdens would induce the Kremlin leadership to renounce their claims to Ukrainian territory. While the Kremlin might be willing to negotiate on their support for the rebel republics in southwest Ukraine (though doubtful), there has been zero indication that the Russian leadership will give up its claim to Crimea. **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**

*“...Alexander III loved Russia and believed in it, and by unveiling this monument today we pay tribute to his deeds, achievements and merits, we show our respect for the continuous history of our country, for the people of all ranks and social classes who earnestly served the Fatherland.”*

*- Russian President Vladimir Putin at the unveiling ceremony for the Alexander III monument in Crimea.*

**Source:** “Под Астраханью успешно прошли первые стрельбы систем С-400 для Крыма (The first launch of the S-400 designed to provide air defense for Crimea, was successfully conducted in the Astrakhan region),” TASS, 30 November 2017. <http://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/4770833>

*The first firing of the S-400 “Triumph” anti-aircraft missile system (SIR), designed to provide air defense of the Crimea, was successfully conducted in the Astrakhan region. The head of the press service of the Southern Military District Vadim Astafyev told TASS.... In the near future, the S-400 will take up combat duty in the Crimea, Astafyev added.... Earlier it was reported that the first S-400 systems were on alert duty on the peninsula in January 2017.*

**Source:** “Unveiling of monument to Alexander III,” Russian Presidential Website, 18 November 2017. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56125>

*Vladimir Putin took part in the unveiling ceremony for the monument to the Peacemaker tsar Alexander III. The monument has been erected in the Livadia Palace park, Crimea.*

*Vladimir Putin: Friends,*

*Today here in Crimea, at the famous Livadia Palace, we are unveiling a monument to Alexander III, an outstanding statesman and patriot, a man of stamina, courage and unwavering will.*

*He always felt a tremendous personal responsibility for the country’s destiny: he fought for Russia in battlefields, and after he became the ruler, he did everything possible for the progress and strengthening of the nation, to protect it from turmoil, internal and external threats.*

*Contemporaries called him the Peacemaker tsar. However, according to Sergei Vitte, he gave Russia 13 years of peace not by yielding but by a fair and unwavering firmness. Alexander III stood up for the country’s interests directly and openly, and that policy ensured the growth of Russia’s influence and authority in the world....*

*...Alexander III also began a major program for the army’s modernization. Large-scale shipbuilding projects were implemented, including those for the Black Sea Fleet.*

*He believed that a strong, sovereign and independent state should rely not only on its economic and military power but also on traditions; that it is crucial for a great nation to preserve its identity whereas any movement forward is impossible without respect for one’s own history, culture and spiritual values....*

*...Alexander III loved Russia and believed in it, and by unveiling this monument today we pay tribute to his deeds, achievements and merits, we show our respect for the continuous history of our country, for the people of all ranks and social classes who earnestly served the Fatherland.*