

# **Between Balance of Power and Balance of Resolve: Why Russia Used Fait Accompli in Crimea But Frozen Conflict in South Ossetia?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the past few decades, Russia and the U.S. have conflicts of interest, especially in Russia's neighbors. For example, in 2008, Russia adopted a frozen conflict tactic in South Ossetia, while in 2014, Russia adopted a fait accompli tactic in Crimea. Then why Russia employed different strategies respectively? The paper argues the difference based on the different local balance of power and the balance of resolve. If Russia both has a stronger local balance of power and balance of resolve vis-a-vis its target, for example, in Crimea, then it is willing to use fait accompli. However, whenever either its local balance of power or balance of resolve or both, is weaker, frozen conflict is more likely to be used. This is the case of South Ossetia. More specifically, Russia has a military base in Crimea, which gives it a local military advantage and has a strong resolution to control Crimea. Although Ukraine has the U.S. as the protector, U.S. is geographically far away. Therefore the U.S. is less determined to be involved and cause escalation. By contrast, Georgia regards South Ossetia as an inalienable territory, while Russia originally had no troops there. Therefore, Russia's local balance of power and balance of resolve are both weaker than the Crimea case. As a result, it preferred frozen conflict.

**Keywords:** *fait accompli, frozen conflict, balance of power, balance of resolve*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the past few decades, Russia frequently broke out some disputes with its neighbors. Fait Accompli and Frozen Conflicts are the strategies employed by Russia, depending on different circumstances and situations. From Russia's side, it is thinking about the responsibility to protect the Russian-speaking people in Crimea and South Ossetia, to both deal with geopolitical and domestic concerns, and prevent the West from hurting Russia's national interests and earning respect. Fait accompli and frozen conflict are essential for two reasons. First, it enables us to understand better how Russia deals with its neighbors. Second, learning how Russia uses fait accompli and frozen conflict can help us better understand international politics more generally [1].

However, why Russia employed fait accompli in Crimea and frozen conflict in South Ossetia, respectively, and more generally under what circumstances, these two strategies will be used? This paper will address this question.

In this paper, I argue that fait Accompli and Frozen Conflict are depended on different local balance of power and balance of resolve. To illustrate this, I will analyze Russia's strategy in Crimea and South Ossetia. Russia adopted fait Accompli in Crimea because it is militarily strong and has a firm resolution, frozen conflict in South Ossetia because Russia has a relatively low balance of power in that area while the balance of resolve is not that strong.

In the next section, I will raise the general theory of fait accompli and frozen conflicts. Section 3 will discuss how Russia employs fait accompli and frozen conflicts to Crimea and South Ossetia in different circumstances. Section 4 is the conclusion part, explaining Russia's strategy on International relations with the United States, Russia, and China.

## **2. GENERAL THEORY OF FAIT ACCOMPLI AND FROZEN CONFLICTS**

This section will put forward the theory of fait accompli and frozen conflicts, and why they're widely employed in the past decades. Then, I want to explain

what causes states to choose fait accompli and frozen conflicts, and I use two variables to explain these two strategies: local Balance of Power and Balance of Resolve.

**2.1. Definition**

Fait accompli is something that has already happened or been done and cannot be changed. A fait accompli (accomplished fact in French) is a negotiating tactic generally used in International Relations. The principle is that one party will take a surprise action to create a favorable negotiating position, which enables the actor to create a fact given, thus achieving its aim of control, while it is hard for the defensive side to react. This accomplished fact impacts the outcome of the negotiation. From the International Relations perspective, the fait accompli takes place on a far smaller and sometimes nonviolent scale. The challenger aims to escape escalation rather than prevail after it. A fait accompli does not violently disarm, disable, or destroy the defender [1].

Frozen conflict is a situation when there is no active armed conflict. However, it is just a ceasefire instead of signing peace treaties. To create frozen conflicts in certain areas enables the actor to establish a stable system that is favorable to them, as well as to show that they are willing to intervene particular region. The final goal for the attacker usually is to establish a new security order [3].

**2.2 How can states decide between Fait Accompli and Frozen Conflict?**

Balance of Power and Balance of Resolve are the two reasons that lead to the difference of fait accompli and frozen conflict, and there is two balance of power: general balance of power and local balance of power, but here we only consider the local balance of power, since the general balance of power of the protector might far away, it is less prone to be involved in. As shown in Table one, if a state has both a strong balance of power and resolve, the result will be a fait accompli. However, whether a state has a more robust balance of power but weak resolve or a fragile balance of power but firm resolve is likely to have frozen conflict. Of course, when a state neither has a strong balance of power nor resolve, the frozen conflict will happen as well.

In the local balance of power, when the attacker is more potent—well-equipped nuclear weapons, military modernization, technology, industrial production, etc. —it prefers to employ fait accompli. Since the weaker side is usually intimidated, the attacker can impose the fait accomplish without concerning escalations or avenges, like what is shown in Table one [1].

However, there is sometimes the weaker side having a strong partner to protect it, but the partner has a relatively low balance of resolve, thus less likely to lead to escalation... like what is shown in Table one. Usually, the protector is geographically far away from the conflict, so it is a relatively high cost to send its troops directly to the place to exert military intervention or threats. Besides, it is not worthwhile for the protector to take the risk of causing escalation so as to help its weaker partner. Even seeing its partner being harmed while doing nothing is beneficial than involving in escalation. Therefore, if the offensive side can calculate the risk correctly, thinking about whether it results in a successful gain or escalation depends on whether the challenger has successfully gauged the level of loss the defender will accept, it can achieve its political goal [1].

Conflicts accompanied soldiers and military forces that have ended through a ceasefire, whether de factor de jure, rather than a peace treaty, are regarded as frozen [5]. The frozen conflicts usually are regarded as a significant threat to the local government and inhabitants. However, sometimes states can benefit from frozen conflicts, allowing states to achieve their goals politically.

Frozen conflicts break out when the offensive side has a low balance of power but a high balance of resolve, shown in Table one. It is not strong enough to make it become fait accompli, but it is strong enough that the defender cannot end the conflict. In this scenario, the offensive side usually does not have a military base or direct political control in the area. Instead, the defenders have a certain amount of control in these areas.

Table one shows sometimes the offensive side doesn't have as high determination as it does in the scenario of fait accompli but has strong military power. It is also inclined to freeze the conflicts. These places are called buffer zones that can create turmoils. Also, frozen conflicts are a solution to creeping the protectors in the overlapping sphere of influence [5]. What is more, when the attacker neither has a strong balance of power nor resolve, frozen conflicts happen.

**Table 1** How balance of power and balance of resolve can lead to fait accompli and frozen conflict

From the perspective of the offensive side		Balance of Resolve	
		High	Low
Balance of Power	High	Fait accompli	Frozen conflict
	Low	Frozen conflict	Frozen conflict

**2.3 Fait Accompli in the World Politics**

After 1945, fait accompli is more likely to be employed for grabbing territories instead of interstate war. According to the data on all "land grabs" since 1918, the research note documents a stark discrepancy. From

1918 to 2016, 112 land grabs seized territory by fait accompli, which reveals that the fait accompli deserves a larger role in International Relations if one side is willing to initiate an operation to grab lands. The attacker ought to appropriately estimate the adversary's bearing capacity if it plans to impose a fait accompli. If it successfully anticipates that the defender can accept the result rather than retaliation, fait accompli cannot be a risk [1].

## **2.4 Frozen Conflicts in the World Politics**

For example, in the real world, the frozen conflict tactic has been implemented in Moldova, Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, where there are endless disputes between big powers. To analyze these conflicts reveals the states' growing understanding of frozen conflicts and the opportunities, which helps them be present to achieve global and regional objectives.

Conflicts in places like Georgia and South Ossetia are significant to both the regional and global political atmosphere. Since they are all at the corner of escalation, once incidents incited them then exploded, the situation is likely to get out of control. Besides, if these indecisive conflicts keep on, it is detrimental to subregional integration, for example, among the Transcaucasian states of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. In general, a system is now established around the Black Sea through these conflicts [3].

After laying out the general theory, I will use Russia's application of fait accompli and frozen conflict on Crimea and South Ossetia to illustrate it.

## **3. FAIT ACCOMPLI VERSUS FROZEN CONFLICTS IN RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

Now, it is time to put the theory of fait accompli and frozen conflicts into Russia's case and explain how fait accompli and frozen conflicts allow states to achieve their political goal. This section will provide a historical background of the two conflicts in Crimea and South Ossetia through broader and local perspectives. In Crimea, Russia employs fait accompli. In South Ossetia, Russia uses frozen conflicts.

### **3.1. Background**

The historical background of Eastern Europe and the International Relations between the U.S. and Russia were complicated. Russia intended to enlarge its influence sphere from its former Soviet Union states, regarding them as "special relation countries" while expecting to earn respect from the West. The United States, by contrast, insisted that these Eastern European countries were independent states and they had their sovereignty. From the West's side, Russia had no rights and

legitimacy to interfere in these regions, supposed to be independent. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these places still lacked an agreement on what to be called collectively, as a particular region, and described.

Hoping to gain absolute respect from the West [5], Russia wanted to compromise: NATO should not expand to Russia's neighbors. The former Soviet states could have more corporations with the West. However, the fact is that NGOs were trying to help the political groups in these states for the sake of democracy [14], but this annoyed Russia. President Putin criticized a world that the United States' dominations were not fair, and he intended to make Russia be the Third Party of the world [12]. To respond, he took over Crimea, a peninsula he feared that would host a NATO naval base, working to destabilize Ukraine until the Ukrainians abandoned their efforts to join the West [11].

Color Revolutions replaced "Nationalists" governments with former soviet leaders like Shevardnadze and Kuchma. "Nationalists" seemed to be an excuse by these former Soviet Union officials. The Rose Revolution led by Saakashvili revealed that Georgia was seeking integration into the West and committing to democracy. Also, it aimed to join the coalition of the U.S. and Europe. What's more, the pro-west president wanted to reincorporate the separatist region into Georgia, bring Georgia into Euro-Atlantic structures. In Orange Revolution, though Russia allocated plenty of money to help Yanukovich make sure that the same thing would not happen in Ukraine, it failed. Yushchenko finally won the election and began to work on democratic reformations with the help of the West [13].

### **3.1.1. Global Balance of Power**

America is a global power with global interests. Its military, first of all, serves as a way of defense. Beyond that, it is in charge of maintaining the U.S.'s influence abroad, protecting America's allies, and ensuring that they have the freedom to use international sea, air, space, and cyberspace. Also, America's army is capable of dealing with its enemies. Therefore, the U.S. and its allies are secured, and the U.S.'s influence is stabilized [13].

Regarding Russia, its combined military capabilities are relatively weak. However, under Vladimir Putin, though the conflict with Georgia had shown that Russia could not rapidly deploy enough combat-ready units even for a small war, Russia would remain a major nuclear power with more military expenditure sanctioned by President Putin [13].

The structure of the Russian military now contains three main branches. Land-based systems are the most stronger side of Moscow's nuclear triad. Second is the Nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs). However, the air-launched element of Russia's strategic

forces is the weakest, in that it is dependent on a small number of modern bomber aircraft [6].

### **3.2 *Fait Accompli in Crimea***

For the Kremlin, Ukraine plays even a more critical role than Georgia does:

More people are residing in Ukraine, a large number of Russia's gas pipelines to Europe pass through Ukraine, and the Black Sea Fleet is headquartered in Crimea. Besides, roughly one-sixth of the country's population is Russian-speaking people, who play a role as a "reason" for president Putin to "protect" this group of people. The relations between Russia and Ukraine remains ambiguous for centuries. Russian and Ukrainians have continuous disputes and disagreements regarding national and ethical identities. From Moscow's point of view, the Russian state was born in Kyiv, and the Ukrainians are not a separate ethnic group, but "Little Russians," descendants of the same ancient East Slavic tribes. Ukrainians hold different opinions. Since Khrushchev sent Crimea to Ukraine as a gift, Crimea belongs to Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union. When the crisis broke out, Russia tried to take Crimea back and using the *fait accompli* strategy under the Ukraine crisis [16].

#### **3.2.1 *Local Balance of Power***

The local balance of power is favorable to Russia—Russia is strong in Crimea, which can operate *fait accompli*. By contrast, the U.S. is far away, so it is difficult for the U.S. to participate actively. Now, Russia is focusing on strengthening its military power in Crimea. It continuously assigns well-equipped troops as well as improves the nuclear potential in that area. Besides, through widely deploying cruise missiles, Russia intends to gain more control of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean [15].

"Anti-Ukrainian" secretly received help from Russia. The reason why President Putin supported Yanukovich to elect the president in Ukraine was that Yanukovich promised to allow Russia to use Sevastopol base [16]. All of these actions enable Russia to grab Crimea directly.

For Ukraine, In 2014, the Chief of the General Staff from February to July 2014, Mykhailo Kutsyn, claimed that the Ukraine troops lacked time to respond to Russia's actions in Crimea. There was, in the winter of 2014, a secret operation designed by Ukraine, aiming to take back Crimea but failed.

#### **3.2.2 *Balance of Resolve***

Russia has a more robust balance of resolve. Jutting out into the Black Sea, the peninsula Crimea and its leading port are geographically crucial for Russia. The city Sevastopol has played a dominant maritime role on

trade routes in this region for centuries, which is why the Russian government was handing out passports in Crimea, a technique for encouraging separatism. Actually, this strategy had been used before in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Most Western observers did not explain why Russian forces would choose to invade Crimea, stage a referendum, and declare Crimea to be part of Russia. However, Putin claimed that Russia's act was appropriate for protecting Russian citizens, though there was no evidence that any Russian was harmed or abused. For President Putin, to control Crimea meant Ukraine could not be entirely inclined to the West.

Compared to Russia, the West's protector is geographically far away from Russia and has lower determination. Western European leaders—notably Macron—are eager to repair relations with Russia. They are not going to push Moscow to compromise; instead, they are more likely to criticize that Kyiv is stubborn. Besides, Ukraine is less worthy to the U.S. than to Russia. U.S. does not care that much, since it comprehends that it's the side that will give up first. Therefore, the U.S. did not initiate these conflicts. Otherwise, the conflicts might escalate, getting out of control and finally becoming a nuclear war.

#### **3.2.3 *Consequence***

For President Putin, taking over Crimea could abandon Ukraine from being inclined to the West. However, it made the international community condemn Russia. From the side of the West, the overthrow of Ukraine's democracy was defined as illegal [11].

A resolution to urge Russia to withdraw all its military forces from Crimea immediately and to stop occupying the Ukraine's territory was passed by the UN. From the West's perspective, Russia's aggressive behavior violated international law, and Crimea should be returned right now. Moreover, Russia was blamed because of its transfer of advanced weapon systems "including nuclear-capable aircraft and missiles, weapons, ammunition, and military personnel" to the territory of Ukraine [10]. Besides, the residents in Crimea, especially the local Ukrainians experiencing a challenging time, were not satisfied with Moscow's abuse of seizing Ukrainian military industry enterprises. What was more, the West denounced Russians' construction of warships.

After talking about Crimea, here I'm going to explain how it allows Russia to achieve its political goal in South Ossetia through frozen conflicts.

### **3.3 *Frozen Conflicts in South Ossetia***

The Soviet Union was disintegrated due to Nationalism, and this idea remained prevailing but ambiguous in Georgia. For example, the South Ossetians

lacked autonomy in Georgia, which incited them to seek for liberty. However, Georgia was still struggling under Russia's sphere of influence, seeming that the UN's help, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), did not work. The Rose Revolution in 2004 finally remarked people's inner desire seeking for the western style of ideology and life. Later it became exemplary for other former Soviet Union States to imitate [4].

### 3.3.1 Local Balance of Power

The war that happened in South Ossetia was the first time Russia imposed its will on its neighbors after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A variety of Russian troops were sent to Tskhinvali to support Russia's operation and harm Georgia's forces in South Ossetia [9].

As the protector, indeed, NATO played a significant role. Being reluctant to be involved in the conflict with Russia, most allies in NATO are not allowed Georgia to join the coalition. Since if one of the Allies had helped Georgia, all European Union members would have got involved. Therefore, NATO has to consider seriously that whether give Saakashvili a hand militarily [4].

### 3.3.2 Balance of Resolve

Russia has relatively fewer resolutions in South Ossetia. Assigning its troops to occupy South Ossetia, Russia has its stakes in Georgia, which is very different. Moscow sought to block Tbilisi's westward orientation. Although Russia is worried about the Chechen fighters in the Pankisi Gorge, president Putin does not want the U.S. troops to enter Georgia, training Georgian troops to counter-terrorism. Moreover, Russia opposed the BTC oil pipeline, aiming to back separatist regimes in Georgia to control the export routes and the neighbors by whom the routes passed. Moscow treated it as a part of the U.S. strategy to confine Russia's influence. Thus Russia creates some turmoils there to ensure that the governments in Georgia will not be entirely inclined to the West...

A zeal for territorial integrity boosted the Georgians' balance of resolve. President Saakashvili first intended to solve the territory disputes by enchanting the attractiveness of Georgia economically. In January 2004, he bet, if the economy of Georgia had developed quickly, then self-autonomy regions would have possessed less sense of alienation. Besides, the pro-west President was prone to receive help from the West, offered by the EU and NATO. However, the response from European capitals was lukewarm. At that time, though, Sergey Bagapsh won the Abkhaz election, these places were much more closely controlled by Russia [2].

### 3.3.3 Consequence

Russia emphasized that Georgia's behavior in South Ossetia was inappropriate. Therefore, President Putin sent his troops in response. The 2008 war was different from the previous world war. Many countries did not directly participate in it, but they all influenced it, like the EU countries. They forbade Georgia to join the coalitions with the West. Therefore, the frozen conflict caused by Russia remains till today—ceasefire has assigned, and cold conflict has continued [13]. However, endless disputes make the local people suffered, having a hard time living.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In general, *fait accompli* is employed when the offensive side both exerts a strong power and resolve, while under other circumstances, when the attacker is relatively militarily weaker or less resolute, or both, frozen conflicts are likely to happen. Russia is militarily strong in Crimea, and Crimea is both militarily and economically important, so Russia uses *fait accompli* there. However, in South Ossetia, Russia originally had no troops there, and this autonomous region is not so important as Crimea. Thus, it prefers to use frozen conflicts.

To study the case of Russia and its strategies like *fait accompli* and frozen conflicts in International Relations enables us to have a better understanding of the world. Today, there are two significant trend lines in the world: great revisionist powers, like Russia and China [7], and the democratic world led by the U.S. Whether the U.S. should isolate these powers like Russia and China or cooperate with them remains an indecisive debate, and there might be some unavoidable conflicts. For example, will China plan to retake Taiwan through wars as a *fait accompli*, or still maintain it as a frozen conflict? Whether the U.S. will react is very important. If so, an escalation that is likely to end as nuclear wars might happen. Therefore, it is necessary for actors in today's world to think critically and rationally about the strategies like *fait accompli* and frozen conflicts in advance.

For both the Ukraine and Georgia, it is hard to maintain their territorial sovereignty. The solution is to be an independent buffer zone between Russia and the West. It seems that Ukraine and Georgia must compromise on Crimea and South Ossetia in exchange for help from the West.

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