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# BLACK SEA RISING

## Russia's Strategy in Southeast Europe

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# THE ISSUE

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President Vladimir Putin's Kremlin has sought to reverse the transformations of the post-Cold War era during which Russia lost its satellites, withdrew militarily from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), forfeited its regional predominance, and curtailed its international power projection. Moscow's primary strategic objective under the Putin presidency is to create a Eurasian "pole of power" or a bloc of states under predominant Russian influence that will necessitate containing, undermining and reversing NATO influence throughout Europe's east. Even where it cannot pressure or entice its neighbors to integrate in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Kremlin attempts to neutralize nearby capitals by preventing them from moving into Western institutions, particularly NATO and the European Union (EU).

In this strategic context, Russia's supremacy in the Black Sea becomes critical for restoring its east European and Eurasian dominion, as well as projecting power toward the Mediterranean and Middle East. Its offensives in and around the Black Sea are part of a larger anti-NATO strategy in which naval forces play a significant and growing role. Russia is using the Black Sea as a more advantageous method of revisionism than extensive land conquests. Control of ports and sea lanes delivers several benefits: it prevents NATO from projecting sufficient security for its Black Sea members; deters the intervention of littoral states on behalf of vulnerable neighbors; threatens to choke the trade and energy routes of states not in compliance with Russia's national ambitions; and gives Moscow an enhanced ability to exploit fossil fuels in maritime locations.

# Significance of the Black Sea

The Black Sea region forms an important crossroads and a strategic intersection of east-west and south-north corridors. Access to and from the Black Sea is vital for all littoral states and nearby neighbors, and a substantial military presence contributes to projecting power into several adjacent regions. Whoever controls or predominates in the Black Sea can project power toward mainland Europe, especially the Balkans and Central Europe, as well as the Eastern Mediterranean, the South Caucasus and the northern Middle East.

In assessing Russia's challenge to the post-1989 status quo in Europe, the Western analytical community has recently focused a great deal of attention on the situation in the Baltic Sea, where U.S. allies face pressure in both the "hybrid" and conventional warfare spaces. Often overlooked in these assessments is the "southern" dimension in Russian strategy and, in particular, the role of the Black Sea as a contested zone in regional geopolitics. The Black Sea is a key component of Russia's revisionist enterprise and its attempts to reverse NATO's gains during the past two decades. For the first time since the Cold War, it is no longer unthinkable to consider the possibility of Moscow extending its future control along the northern coast of the Black Sea. This would position Russia to exert greater pressure on NATO members Romania and Bulgaria, including the mouth of the Danube and, among other targets, the maritime energy fields of Romania's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Moscow's current strategy in the Black Sea is therefore important as a case study both for its methods and for its implications. As this report considers, Russia is using the Black Sea as a more advantageous method of revisionism than extensive land conquests. Control of ports and sea lanes delivers several benefits: it threatens to choke the trade and energy routes of wayward states, prevents NATO from projecting sufficient security for Black Sea members and gives Moscow a larger stake in exploiting fossil fuels in maritime locations. The Black Sea strategy could also disrupt or challenge energy supplies through pipeline connections between the Caspian Basin and Europe and set back EU attempts to pursue energy diversity. This would further curtail U.S. and European connections with Central Asia and undermine prospects for future natural gas deliveries from Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan to Europe.

What was old is new again in the Black Sea region. This maritime space was virtually a Soviet lake during the Cold War when Moscow controlled its communist European satellites. Western influences subsequently expanded during the 2000s as Romania and Bulgaria acceded to NATO while Ukraine and Georgia asserted their sovereignty and pro-Western orientations in order to deter Russia's unwelcome interventions. More recently, Moscow's revived attempts to control the Black Sea not only undermine the independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia; they also directly challenge the security of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey. As a contested geostrategic zone, the remilitarization of the Black Sea is seen by Moscow as a necessary policy to prevent Russia's containment and any limitation of its powers around its western borders.

Control over the Black Sea is one of the most important strategic objectives that Russia has along its borders with both NATO and the EU. It is the fulcrum of Moscow's revisionist enterprise to restore Russia's international power and to limit NATO's presence both as the mainstream of deterrence to Russia's assertiveness and as a source of attraction for Russia's neighbors. In addition, the installation of elements of a NATO missile defense system, the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA), in several Central European states, including Romania, has prompted Moscow to further develop its own missile systems, including within its Black Sea Fleet, claiming that the EPAA constitutes a threat to Russia's ballistic missile arsenal.



The Black Sea region also has enormous economic importance and future potential as a transit corridor for goods and resources and with a continental shelf that possesses abundant natural resources, including natural gas deposits. With a growing naval presence, Moscow could disrupt energy supplies through pipeline connections between the Caspian Basin and Europe and thereby set back EU attempts to pursue energy diversity outside Moscow's orbit. This would also curtail U.S. and European economic connections with Central Asia and undermine prospects for future natural gas deliveries from Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and other Caspian Basin states to Europe.

Given the increased international competition for influence in the Middle East, the Black Sea has also been transformed in the main logistical platform supporting Russia's naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aden Gulf area. Moscow currently maintains 10 ships in the Eastern Mediterranean, several of them transported from its Black Sea Fleet.

The Black Sea is also an important arena for the West and forms a zone of vulnerability for the eastern flank of the Alliance. The region contains significant ethnic and religious diversity, a factor of potential discord that enables Russia to inject itself in neighbors' affairs and exert pressure on several governments to return within Moscow's orbit. NATO cannot allow any of its littoral member states (Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey) to be seriously threatened by an ambitious adversary or it could lose its credibility as a security organization. The West also has a keen economic interest in diversifying energy sources and upholding routes from the Caspian Basin, in which the Black Sea forms a hub and network for energy deliveries and pipelines to Europe outside of Russia's control.



## Moscow's Primary Objectives

The overarching objective of Moscow's foreign policy is to restore Russia as a major "pole of power" in a multipolar world — in effect, the leading superpower in Eurasia. Following the return of Vladimir Putin to Russia's presidency in May 2012, the Kremlin reinvigorated its ambitions and regional assertiveness. It also made more explicit its goal of reversing the growing influences of the United States within Central and Eastern Europe and the wider Eurasian zone. If left to run its course, the practical outcome of the strategy would result in the restoration of the Yalta-Potsdam post-World War II order, in which Moscow dominated Eurasia and half of Europe.

The creation of a Eurasian pole of power necessitates containing, undermining and even reversing NATO influence throughout Europe's east. Even where it cannot pressure or entice its neighbors to comply with its mechanisms of economic and security integration, including the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Kremlin attempts to neutralize nearby capitals by preventing them from moving into two key Western institutions — NATO and the EU. In several cases, Moscow also seeks to influence countries that are already NATO and EU members so that they either support or do not block Russia's objectives in multinational institutions or within the wider region.

Russia's geopolitical project no longer relies on Soviet-era instruments in targeted states, such as strict ideological allegiance, the penetration and control of local ruling parties and security services and the permanent stationing of Russian troops in satellite countries. Instead, sufficient tools of pressure are applied to ensure the fundamental goal — prevailing influence over the foreign and security policies of immediate neighbors so they will either remain neutral or support Russia's international positions. In effect, the objective is to create pliant protectorates around the borders of the Russian Federation.

The Black Sea is a key component of Russia's revisionist enterprise and an attempt to reverse the gains that NATO has registered during the past two decades. The objective is not merely to protect the southern flank of the Russian Federation, but also to intimidate its exposed and unprotected neighbors and deny NATO access to Ukraine, Moldova and the entire Caucasus region. Moscow's long-term goal is to contain and roll back NATO so that the Black Sea becomes a predominantly Russian domain or one divided between Russia and Turkey, but where Ankara acquiesces to Kremlin empire-building in its former Tsarist and Soviet dominions. Nonetheless, Turkey's compliance cannot be taken for granted in the light of the Russia-Turkey conflict triggered by the shooting down of a Russian warplane in November 2015 that allegedly violated Turkey's airspace.

Moscow formulated a revised maritime doctrine in July 2015, which focused on creating an A2/AD (anti-access, area denial) zone toward NATO in the Black Sea while at the same time ensuring a growing threat to the Alliance's southeastern flank.<sup>1</sup> By dominating the Black Sea, Russia also seeks to project its naval power outward toward Central Europe, the entire Balkan Peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean. The Kremlin clearly benefited from relative Western neglect of this strategic region during the Barack Obama administration. The Allies failed to develop an effective Black Sea security architecture that could deter Russia's advances. As a result, a mixture of hard and soft aggression undergirded by a naval buildup permits Moscow to steadily achieve its geopolitical targets while undermining NATO and EU credibility. The West is denied the ability to project power in the basin by strengthening its naval capabilities that could challenge Russia's predominance and its spheres of influence.

Following its de facto partition of Georgia in August 2008 and its militarization of the captured province of Abkhazia, Moscow has reestablished control over the eastern littoral of the Black Sea and is extending its power deeper throughout the South Caucasus and northern Middle East. The first stage of containing NATO in the Black Sea was accomplished in the summer of 2008 following the invasion and partition of Georgia and the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as separate states. Since that time, Russian forces have boosted their presence in both territories and constitute a constant threat to Georgian stability and territorial integrity, while effectively freezing Tbilisi's progress toward NATO accession. The Kremlin has also manipulated the simmering dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over occupied Azerbaijan territories, including Nagorno-Karabakh, in order to maintain primary influence as a mediator and arms supplier to both sides in the conflict and to prevent a resolution of the dispute between Baku and Yerevan, which would diminish Russia's regional predominance.

Russia is currently in the process of fully controlling the northern Black Sea littoral following the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, incitement of the proxy insurgency in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine and incessant attempts to further divide Ukraine territorially and politically. As the Kremlin cannot currently carve out a Novorossiia entity along Ukraine's southern coastline, largely because of Ukrainian resistance, it will likely settle for Crimea and Donbas and seek to destabilize the pro-Western government in Kyiv. Moscow's underlying goal is to prevent Ukraine from moving into Western institutions, and it pursues the same objectives in Moldova and Georgia.

Control of Crimea allows Russia to turn the Kerch Strait between Ukraine and Russia into its own territorial waters and places the Sea of Azov under its de facto control. It also expands Russia's maritime borders and its maritime gas and oil fields.

**Moreover, the economic zones of Russia and Romania have become de facto adjacent; in effect, *Russia now shares a maritime border with NATO and the EU in the Black Sea.***

The takeover of Crimea raises the question of demarcating new maritime borders between Russia and Ukraine. Moscow has extended its 200-mile EEZ for the exploration and exploitation of the seabed in the northern Black Sea, placing Ukraine in a vulnerable position economically, militarily and politically. In effect, Moscow has more than halved Ukraine's coastline and controls the country's access to open Black Sea waters. By doing so Russia is establishing its dominion over vast oil and gas reserves off the Crimean shore, thereby damaging Ukraine's hopes for energy independence.

Until now, the southern littoral of the Black Sea has been largely neutralized by Moscow, as Turkey has not challenged Russia's gradual re-imperialization and is preoccupied with conflicts along its own southern borders. However, if the dispute between Moscow and Ankara over Syria escalates, Turkey could prove more assertive in projecting NATO interests in the Black Sea region, especially as the western littoral becomes the next focus of Russia's attention.

Ankara increasingly views Russia as the regional aggressor, and this can bring Turkey closer to the United States and favor a stronger NATO presence in the region. The current Russo-Turkish dispute has revealed that recent cooperation between the two states was largely a function of personal relations between Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan rather than the basis for strong durable ties. Conflicts could further accelerate with the development of Russian-Iranian relations based on their common interests in the Middle East. Russia's military presence could also increase in states with an anti-Turkish policy, especially Greece and Cyprus.

In the case of Romania and Bulgaria, Moscow's objective is to neutralize NATO's eastern flank and ensure that their governments do not oppose Moscow's international offensives and that NATO militaries cannot deter its maritime deployments. As evident in Ukraine, the Kremlin not only uses hard power but also subverts and weakens its neighbors through a host of instruments and pressures. It does not need to deploy overwhelming military force to achieve its objectives but relies on the elements of surprise, camouflage, deception and the weakness and unpreparedness of adversaries.

Potential scenarios of instability engineered by Moscow could involve further splitting Ukraine by linking Crimea with Transnistria — thereby establishing a direct land border with NATO, strategically closing in on the Bosphorus Straits, gaining control of the mouth of the Danube and its adjacent region of Dobrogea that straddles Romania and Bulgaria, transforming Moldova into a satellite state, and incorporating Transnistria inside the Russian Federation. Alternatively, Russia can foster instability through less overt but no less effective methods such as rhetorical saber rattling, snap conventional or nuclear exercises, aggressive airspace incursions and other provocative acts. Whether the approach is maximalist or minimalist, the aim is the same: degrade the willingness of neighboring states to resist Moscow's desire for primacy in the Black Sea.



# Kremlin Strategies



Russia's key strategic goal in the Black Sea is to lock the basin under its supervision.<sup>2</sup> For this purpose it employs both military and nonmilitary instruments. On the military front, the principal method is to exploit Russia's control of the sea to exert pressure on the littoral states, including Ukraine, the South Caucasus countries, Romania and Bulgaria. The maritime strategy for territorial purposes uses naval buildups, the stealth seizure of critical littoral zones, the creation of A2/AD pockets, and the introduction of tactical nuclear weapons to reincorporate a much larger area under Russia's control than would be possible by engaging solely in land-based operations. Hence, the potentially costly capture and control of territory is minimized.

Russia's Black Sea Fleet is intended to protect the southern flank of the Federation, and in the case of a Georgia-type conflict, to deny access to the Caucasus and to Ukraine following the Crimean annexation. Since its attack on Ukraine, Moscow has enhanced its status as a maritime power in several ways:

- The integration of Crimea gives Russia a longer coastline on the Black Sea. Before March 2014, it possessed approximately 570 kilometers of coastline on the Sea of Azov with no deep ports to dock a fleet between the Kerch Strait and the Georgian border, plus 300 kilometers of Abkhazian coastline under Moscow's military control since August 2008. Crimea provides Russia with an additional coastline of several hundred kilometers along the Black Sea together with the most important Black Sea port, Sevastopol, as well as other Crimean ports.
- After acquiring Sevastopol, Moscow can commission and dispatch new vessels, including coastal artillery, land-based forces and aircraft. An upgraded port of Novorossiysk on the northeast coast of the Black Sea cannot be compared in quality to Sevastopol and its eight deep-water bays. Moscow was prevented from freely upgrading or increasing its military presence in Crimea by the 1997 and 2010 Russia-Ukraine agreements on the Black Sea Fleet. But Moscow is no longer constrained by Kyiv on its Black Sea Fleet deployment.
- The capture of Crimea has resolved another strategic question for Russia, related to the demarcation of maritime borders in the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov. In effect, the Kerch Strait is now Russian and the Sea of Azov is also virtually Russian with Ukraine possessing less than 350 kilometers of the coastline and lacking the capabilities to protect it.
- Russia has expanded its continental shelf in the Azov and the Black seas and has acquired a maritime zone more than three times the size of Crimea itself, with claimed rights to underwater resources potentially worth trillions of dollars. For instance, Moscow has gained sovereignty over the Pallas gas and oil fields located near the Kerch Strait, believed to hold an estimated 120 billion cubic meters of natural gas and 12 million tons of oil.

The Black Sea Fleet is incorporated into Russia's Southern Military District, which consists of the former North Caucasus military district, the Caspian flotilla, the 4th Air Force and Air Defense Command and the Black Sea Fleet. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Black Sea Fleet has been a mainly "green water fleet" with limited high-seas capabilities.<sup>3</sup> It operates one guided missile cruiser, the *Moskva*, one classic submarine, three frigates, seven large landing ships, and several small antisubmarine warfare boats and small missile or artillery boats.



Russian cruiser *Moskva*

Around 90 percent of the tonnage of the fleet is located in Crimean ports, mainly in Sevastopol. The fleet fulfills several tasks, including protecting Russia's EEZ, securing navigation and sea lines of communication, countering the presence of naval groups of NATO forces, supporting units coming from other Russian fleets operating in the Mediterranean and maintaining leverage over energy supplies from the Caspian Basin to Europe. The expansion and modernization of the Black Sea Fleet has become one of the highest priorities for the Kremlin. By 2020, Russia plans to significantly enhance its military presence in Crimea and establish new military facilities in Abkhazia, while deploying additional mobile missile coastal forces. Moscow's assertive approach embroils a number of other states in its ambitions for maritime preponderance and coastline control, including Moldova, Romania and Bulgaria.

Distinctions need to be made between Moscow's military and nonmilitary strategies in pursuit of its revisionist and expansionist objectives. The Kremlin relies on subterfuge and subversion, exploiting a range of instruments to undermine, bribe, blackmail, threaten and cajole neighbors into submission without necessarily conducting any military offensives. Even when engaged in combat, Moscow does not need to use overwhelming military force to achieve its objectives.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Black Sea region has been a testing ground for Russia's application of its "shadow war" against Western interests and to suborn the littoral states.<sup>4</sup> In Moscow's nonmilitary strategy, various "soft spots" are exploited for penetration, including intelligence services, police forces and military structures. The Kremlin capitalizes on a susceptible information space, corruptible officialdom and inadequate national defenses. It probes and encourages ethnic, religious and territorial grievances, and benefits from political instability, social unrest and state failure. Moscow's pressure points also include economic instruments such as trade restrictions, ownership of key infrastructure and energy cut-offs.

Moscow's propaganda and disinformation campaigns aim to discredit pro-Western and liberal governments throughout the region, while favoring parties and factions more amenable to Russia's influence. The Kremlin seeks to build special relations with individual countries in order to weaken regional solidarity and joint action. In some cases, Moscow can trigger or create new protracted conflicts in territorial enclaves and border regions.

With regard to Romania, the Kremlin may endeavor to manipulate the latent "Greater Romania" idea to promote regional disputes with Moldova and Ukraine, infiltrate saboteurs, orchestrate protests and support separatist activities like those of Hungarian-Székelys (Szeklers) in Transylvania. There is also a risk of disruption to Romania's exploration of Black Sea natural resources through either harassment or a legal dispute involving territorial waters claimed by Russia since it annexed Crimea. Moreover, tourism and commercial trade through the ports of Constanța, Varna and others on the Black Sea or along the Danube River can be unsettled.

# Russia's Military Capabilities

Russia's new military doctrine signed by President Putin in December 2014 depicts an increasingly threatening foreign environment.<sup>5</sup> It claims that intensifying threats emanate from NATO and the United States in particular, including the placement of Western forces in countries adjoining Russia and NATO's development of anti-ballistic missile (ABM), space-based and rapid reaction forces. Moscow is responding to alleged NATO provocations by deploying new offensive nuclear weapons aimed at Western nations, developing an air and missile defense system and producing new precision-guided weapons. Moscow is also willing to violate any treaty that obstructs its neo-imperial agenda, including the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on the inviolability of Ukraine's borders.

Maritime power is the ability of a state to use the maritime sphere to achieve specific policy objectives. In the case of the Black Sea, Russia can concentrate its forces in a relatively small area to gain advantage, whereas NATO has limited access to these waters largely because of stipulations in the 1936 Montreux Convention, which limits the naval presence of non-littoral states in the Black Sea. As part of a broader modernization program, Moscow seeks to develop a naval force that can dominate the Black Sea and expand Russian presence in the Mediterranean. At the same time, Russia retains the right of a preemptive nuclear strike should a military attack, whether from nuclear or conventional weapons, allegedly threaten the integrity or existence of the Russian state.<sup>6</sup>

The Kremlin has embarked on a long-term rearmament program designed to significantly strengthen its multiregional naval power.<sup>7</sup> This program includes building eight new strategic missile submarines, six nuclear attack submarines, nine conventional submarines, 15 frigates and up to 20 corvettes. Much of this new naval capacity is intended for the Northern Fleet in the Arctic, the Atlantic and the Barents and Norwegian seas. Russian amphibious capabilities will also be strengthened. Nonetheless, it is far from clear whether such aims will be fully realized, as state revenues are being depleted because of the collapse of global oil prices and other financial problems in Moscow that could jeopardize defense modernization.

Russia's maritime strategy issued in July 2015 is an assertive document that announces a dramatic increase in the production of high-technology capabilities and bold maritime ambitions, focused on the Atlantic and Arctic, but with a significantly bolstered military presence in the Baltic, Caspian and Black seas. It emphasizes buttressing Russia's non-nuclear deterrence with an investment in both short- and long-range high-precision strike systems. Such systems are already being transferred to the Black Sea and constitute a major threat to both NATO in general and the NATO states bordering the Black Sea specifically. Moscow has developed technologies and positioning systems that deny the West access to maritime areas needed for regional force projection and deterrence.

Crimea will be the main platform for A2/AD-type operations in case of a restricted war and the projection of forces to control the Black Sea and the Bosphorus Strait. Moscow aims to replace its aging Soviet-era ships with modern vessels, especially highly maneuverable and fast platforms such as the French *Mistrals* that would increase its power-projection capacity. By 2020 Moscow intends for the Black Sea Fleet not only to conduct operations in case of a crisis in the Black Sea basin, but also to support the permanent deployment of Russia's Mediterranean Squadron.<sup>8</sup>

NATO officials have expressed concerns about Russia's deployment of anti-ship and anti-aircraft systems in occupied Crimea. Moscow claims it is forced to develop countermeasures in response to an increased NATO presence in the Black Sea. In reality, the regional balance of power has significantly shifted after Russia's takeover of Crimea in March 2014. Moscow is seeking to rapidly develop Crimea for its naval infrastructure and firepower. A critical component is the modernization of the Black Sea Fleet and the deployment of new weapons systems on the captured peninsula that will strengthen Moscow's ability to challenge NATO's presence and undermine the security of littoral states.

The Kremlin is increasingly able to deploy long-range, anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles to strike ground targets, interdict maritime traffic on the Black Sea and impose no-fly zones around the Black Sea littoral. Airborne troops, naval infantry and *Spetsnaz* (special operations) forces could also be stationed in Crimea for potential deployment elsewhere. In early March 2015, Putin suggested that Moscow deploy nuclear weapons in Crimea. The Iskander tactical ballistic missile (either in conventional or nuclear form) has a 400-kilometer range and could reach the entire southern part of Ukraine, including the important industrial cities of Odesa, Krivyi Rih and Dnipropetrovsk, a large part of Moldova, the entire Romanian coastline and a significant portion of the Turkish Black Sea coast. In effect, Moscow is developing capabilities to sequester the Baltic and the Black seas behind its air, air defense, naval, cyber and nuclear forces and deter enemies from entering those seas to try and counter Russia's offensives.

The Kremlin continues to reserve the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction against Russia or its allies, and even in the case of a conventional assault on Russia that would endanger the existence of the state.<sup>9</sup> The Russian Navy aspires to acquire or produce nuclear-powered battle cruisers, with plans for a nuclear-powered supercarrier. New submarines with ballistic missiles would also increase the defensive-deterrence capacity of Russia's submarine fleet.



President Vladimir Putin at the Sevastopol Presidential Cadet Academy.

Russia's annexation of Crimea has provided substantial impetus to Russian naval plans in the Black Sea and the resumption of naval activities in the Mediterranean. Moscow now has a free hand to deploy new platforms in Sevastopol, to upgrade Crimean infrastructures and to dispatch new military hardware on the peninsula.<sup>10</sup> The modernization of the Black Sea Fleet is one of the most ambitious elements of the Russian State Arms Procurement program of 2011–2020. Up to 18 units are being commissioned for the fleet and new infrastructure developed. In December 2015, the *Zelyoniy Dol* and *Serpukhov* warships, built in Russia and equipped with the versatile Kalibr-NK missile system, joined the Black Sea Fleet. By 2020, Moscow plans to spend \$151 billion to modernize its entire navy including the Black Sea Fleet. The purpose of this modernization is to build a combined arms force that can deny access by NATO to the Black Sea and project power outward and threaten U.S. and NATO interests in the Mediterranean and Middle East.

Russia's defense analysts proposed deploying bombers in Crimea to intensify monitoring of NATO's naval presence, including U.S. destroyers that allegedly threaten the functioning of Russia's strategic nuclear forces.<sup>11</sup> Moscow is building a combined air and naval defense network to threaten and interdict foreign fleets in the Black Sea. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has announced that Russia will spend \$2.4 billion on the Black Sea Fleet by 2020 and outfit it with next-generation warships and submarines, air defense systems and marine regiments.<sup>12</sup> Moscow would also deploy modernized ground/air attack fighters, helicopters and the new Su-30M naval aviation fighter. By 2016, a regiment of Tu-22M3 long-range bombers is due to deploy at the Gvardeiskoye airfield. These aircraft are platforms for supersonic long-range anti-ship cruise missiles to support the Mediterranean Squadron and establish an added "deterrence potential" in Southern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.

Russian fighter planes have secured and currently control the vast majority of the Black Sea airspace. According to American analyst Stephen Blank, Russia has expanded its strategic aviation patrol routes above the Black Sea while its Su-24 Fighters practice strikes against "imaginary detachments" of enemy warships together with "surface strike groups and shore-based naval missile units."<sup>13</sup> Moscow is constructing a combined air and naval defense network to threaten and interdict foreign fleets in the Black Sea. This will enable the Black Sea Fleet to carry out A2/AD operations in case of a crisis anywhere in the Black Sea basin.

Moscow is also steadily developing a Special Operations Forces (SSO) command to conduct conventional and unconventional missions that could destabilize targeted states. These developments also present a military threat across the Balkan Peninsula and toward the Aegean and Adriatic seas. The annexation of Crimea and the engineered Donbas revolt have provided ample opportunities for involving special operations forces and airborne elite units in a limited war. With a strong base in Crimea, Russia can conduct fairly rapid amphibious operations across the Black Sea. These could threaten the Ukrainian port of Odesa and impose a more efficient blockade on Georgia. In case of a war between Transnistria and Moldova, the SSO could also conduct diversionary operations or threaten Bucharest to dissuade it from intervening on behalf of the government in Chişinău.

Russia's new military doctrine also calls for Moscow to counter the use of communications technologies against Russia, such as cyberwarfare and social networks. The document contends that among the most serious challenges are attempts to "overturn legitimate governments" in neighboring states and emplace regimes that threaten Russia's interests. In effect, Moscow reserves for itself the right and obligation to defend governments that are amenable to Russian influence, even against the democratic choices of their own populations.

# Impact on Littoral States

The Black Sea is a neglected strategic front for the North Atlantic Alliance. NATO has a limited military presence; the EU has proved unable to manage the Black Sea security environment; and the United States has undergone waning influence and interest in the region under the Obama administration. Meanwhile, Black Sea regional cooperation organizations and various bodies connected with NATO remain weak and ineffective, while the new NATO members have limited military capacities to deter Moscow. The Kremlin has successfully prevented Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova from creating a potent and coordinated organization to shield themselves from Russia's assertiveness, as was envisaged in the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) initiative launched in the late 1990s. As a concept, GUAM never achieved its highest potential. Nevertheless, its very existence highlighted the desire among its members for a counterbalancing mechanism to Russia's relative power in their region.

Russia's military and nonmilitary escalation poses threats to two exposed NATO member states -- Romania and Bulgaria -- as its naval capabilities are far superior to the maritime and air defense capacities of either country. Moreover, NATO operations are conditioned by the Montreux Convention.

With a limited ability for power projection outside of periodic NATO Black Sea exercises, Romania is unprepared to face a heavily militarized Black Sea that would endanger commercial routes and energy resources that Bucharest is currently exploring. One potential ramification of the security crisis could result in restricting the markets between Black Sea ports and the Danube into Central Europe, blocking the Danube-Black Sea canal and restricting trade with non-EU nations, particularly Turkey. An expansion of Russia's proxy war in eastern Ukraine toward Odesa and the Ukrainian side of the Danube Delta could also choke this critical artery and create important losses for the countries using the Danube as a trade access point to the heart of Europe.

The combined navies of Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Georgia are no match for Russia's naval presence in the region. With the second-most-powerful military force among NATO nations, Turkey's naval presence is more substantial but not sufficient on its own to challenge Russia's regional naval capacity. The main problem for Romania and Bulgaria are their weak naval defenses. Romania's naval combat power is centered on a few aging frigates backed up by a half-dozen corvettes. Outdated military capabilities and the slow reform of anti-aircraft, anti-missile and anti-ship systems simply provide an added bonus for Moscow.



## Preliminary Conclusions

A neglect of the Black Sea security flank by the West and Moscow's successful capture or neutralization of the eastern and northern littoral have increasingly exposed Romania and Bulgaria to Moscow's pressure. Additionally, as seen in the November 2015 Russian-Turkish incident when Ankara shot down a Russian jet along Turkey's border with Syria, escalation by Russia can trigger a strong response from Turkey. Such a scenario can result in wider regional instabilities, as both states are heavily militarized powers, with sometimes-competing regional ambitions.

Russia's expanding presence in Crimea creates the prospect of a rapidly remilitarizing Black Sea. Aviation patrol routes and enlarged air and naval defense networks heighten Russia's ability to threaten and interdict foreign fleets—as illustrated by recent Russian harassment of NATO vessels. Moscow has deployed numerous missile-bearing ships and planes to the Black Sea region, which together with Iskander missiles in Crimea place all of the Black Sea littoral within range of Russian conventional and WMD (weapons of mass destruction)-capable missile attacks. At present, none of America's allies in this part of Europe possess effective air and missile defense capabilities.

Russia's enhanced Black Sea forces, which are already being optimized for A2/AD operations, can also be used to threaten European neighbors with long-range air and missile strikes. Moreover, Moscow is steadily pursuing the goal of obtaining naval and army bases in the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean from which it can project power even further afield.

Although Moscow's ultimate plans may not be accomplished in full because of its budgetary constraints, even a partial realization of these goals puts all the littoral states under serious threat, with NATO's entire southeastern flank exposed to harassment and subversion. It is also worth considering that Russia's economic decline may actually encourage Putin to be more assertive and take greater risks on the international front in order to mobilize the public against manufactured foreign enemies and thereby divert attention from Russia's domestic decline. In the light of all these trends and prospects, the Black Sea will remain a major factor in the Kremlin's strategic calculations throughout its campaign against the West.



# Acknowledgments

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# Endnotes

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6. Elbridge Colby, "Nuclear Weapons in the Third Offset Strategy: Avoiding a Nuclear Blind Spot in the Pentagon's New Initiative," Center for a New American Security, February 2015, <http://www.cnas.org/avoiding-nuclear-blindspot-offset-strategy>; and Pavel Podvig, "New Version of the Military Doctrine," Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces (blog), December 26, 2014, [http://russianforces.org/blog/2014/12/new\\_version\\_of\\_the\\_military\\_do.shtml](http://russianforces.org/blog/2014/12/new_version_of_the_military_do.shtml).
7. Delanoë, "The Current Status of Black Sea Regional Security," 4-5.
8. Delanoë, "After the Crimean Crisis: Towards a Greater Russian Maritime Power in the Black Sea," 369, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2014.944386>, 379.
9. The Ukrainian war has greatly exacerbated mistrust between Russia and NATO in the Black Sea region. This could also result in the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Crimea and downgrade cooperation in interdicting WMDs and WMD components trafficked across the Black Sea region. See Igor Delanoë, "Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Persisting Security Challenge to the Black Sea Region," Neighborhood Policy Paper, no.16 (July 2015): 11, <http://www.khas.edu.tr/cies/75>.
10. Igor Delanoë, "After the Crimean Crisis: Towards a Greater Russian Maritime Power in the Black Sea."
11. Stephen Blank, "The Black Sea and Beyond," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings Magazine 14, no. 10 (October 2015), <http://usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2015-10>.
12. As a result of resettlement from Russia the population of Sevastopol is steadily increasing. On January 1, 2014, the city was home to 384,000 people. By August 1, 2015, the population had reached nearly 410,000, a 6.8 percent increase. By August 2015, over 20,000 residents of Russia had moved to Crimea in that year alone. Soldiers make up a large part of this new migration. Several major infrastructure projects support this militarization, including a bridge over the Kerch Strait to connect Crimea to Russia. See Andrii Llymenko, "The Militarization of Crimea under Russian Occupation," October 2015, *Atlantic Council*, Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center, p.2, [http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/The\\_Militarization\\_of\\_Crimea\\_under\\_Russian\\_Occupation.pdf](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/The_Militarization_of_Crimea_under_Russian_Occupation.pdf).
- 13 Blank, "The Black Sea and Beyond."



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