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# **Russia's Interests in the Black Sea and Mediterranean**

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This paper analyzes how Russian interests and actions in the Black Sea relate to Russian interests in the adjoining Mediterranean region. It begins by examining Russia's strategies in the two regions, including the long-term strategic goals, the tools that Russia has used to achieve these goals, and how Russia's invasion of Ukraine and confrontation with the West has affected the goals. I then consider the linkages between the two regions and how successes and failures in one location have affected Russia's ability to carry out its plans in the other. The concluding section assesses the extent to which Russia has been successful in achieving its agenda.

## Russian interests and actions in the Black Sea

### Russia's traditional goals in the Black Sea

Russia's strategy in the Black Sea region has in recent decades been focused on three key goals. First, it seeks to dominate the region politically, to ensure that other regional states are at a minimum not actively hostile to Russian interests. Second, it seeks to control maritime access to the Black Sea and its non-NATO littoral states. And third, it seeks to use the Black Sea as a springboard to increase Russian influence in the Mediterranean and the larger Middle East/North Africa region.

Russia's desire for regional domination has been clear since its brief 2008 war with Georgia. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 were simply further steps along that trajectory. As a result of these actions, Russia has taken direct control of large segments of the Black Sea coastline beyond its internationally recognized borders, including Abkhazia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, and the Ukrainian part of the Azov Sea coast in 2022. It clearly had plans to take the entirety of Ukraine's Black Sea coast in 2022, but was prevented from doing so by successful Ukrainian defensive operations both at sea and on the ground around Mykolaiv.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, Russian actions in pursuit of this strategy of regional domination have not only taken the form of military confrontation. Russia has for many years been conducting influence operations throughout the region designed to destabilize governments it perceives as being anti-Russian, dating back at least to the well-known effort to install Viktor Yanukovich as president of Ukraine in 2004 that culminated in the Orange Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Just in the last year, these efforts have directly affected Georgia, Moldova, and Romania. In Georgia, Russia has provided support for the Georgian government's efforts to falsify elections and restrict anti-government civil society organizations through a foreign agent law that is largely copied from a similar Russian law.<sup>3</sup> In Moldova, after precipitating an economic crisis in 2022 by raising natural gas prices, Russia has provided financing to pro-Russian political parties and direct payments to voters to oppose a referendum in support of EU membership.<sup>4</sup> In Romania, declassified intelligence identified Russian social media influence operations as undermining the integrity of its presidential election led to the annulment of the first round of the election after results had been announced and has undermined trust in the political system.<sup>5</sup>



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Russia's second goal, controlling maritime access to the Black Sea, has been a constant feature of Russian strategy in the region, leading some experts to declare that Russia was seeking to turn the Black Sea into a "Russian lake."<sup>6</sup> Since the downturn in relations between Russia and the West began more than 15 years ago, leaders in Moscow have repeatedly focused on their fears of NATO encroachment in the Black Sea region as the key factor requiring the strengthening of the Russian military in the Black Sea region. Prior to 2022, Russian military leadership was particularly concerned about the increasingly routine nature of Western naval presence in the Black Sea in recent years, including both Black Sea exercises carried out by NATO member navies and regular flights along Russia's maritime border being carried out by intelligence collection aircraft and UAVs.<sup>7</sup> To counter this threat, Russia regularly engaged in harassment of foreign ships and aircraft in order to make NATO naval activities in the Black Sea uncomfortable and potentially dangerous for NATO member navies, potentially reducing their willingness to engage in such activities.<sup>8</sup>

Russia has traditionally viewed the Black Sea as a base from which it could exert influence over its wider southern flank, including especially the Mediterranean Sea, the Middle East, and North Africa. This goal will be examined in greater detail in the linkages section later in this paper. However, it is worth noting that Russian goals of renewing the Black Sea Fleet were constrained until 2014 by Ukrainian veto power over the placement of new ships in Russia's Sevastopol navy base and that the Russian government prioritized the modernization of the Black Sea Fleet immediately after annexing Crimea.<sup>9</sup> The Black Sea Fleet subsequently played a key role in providing logistics for Russia's operations in Syria beginning in 2015 and was the primary supplier of ships and submarines for Russia's Mediterranean Squadron until the closure of the Turkish Straits to most military ships in 2022.<sup>10</sup>

### **Russia's revised Black Sea strategy in the context of its invasion of Ukraine**

Russia's war with Ukraine has forced Russia to modify some elements of its Black Sea strategy, while retaining others. The most notable change is that the closure of the Turkish Straits to Russian naval traffic has largely negated Russia's ability to directly use the Black Sea as a base for exerting influence in the broader Mediterranean region.<sup>11</sup> Russia regards this as a temporary setback for the duration of the war and expects that the Black Sea will resume this role once the war ends and Turkey reopens the Straits to Russian naval traffic.

Russia's ability to control the Black Sea has been greatly damaged by the defeats inflicted on its navy over the last three years by Ukraine. In the early months of the war, Russia considered an amphibious attack on Odesa, initiated an economic blockade of Ukrainian exports, and began to regularly launch land-attack cruise missiles at Ukrainian infrastructure targets as part of a campaign to undermine Ukraine's will to fight and reduce its ability to supply its forces. Through the use of a combination of strikes by missiles and unmanned vessels, Ukraine has largely forced the Russian Navy not only away from its own coastline, but out of Russia's traditional bases in Crimea, eliminating the threat of an amphibious attack and eventually forcing Russia to end its

economic blockade. Russian ships have in recent months rarely ventured beyond the eastern Black Sea coast due to the danger presented by Ukrainian USVs. As a result, Russian naval operations have in recent months largely been limited to carrying out cruise missile strikes from locations near its eastern Black Sea ports.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Russia has continued and even accelerated its non-military efforts to maintain regional dominance through influence operations, as highlighted by the recent operations described in the previous section.

Russia has also had to come to terms with Turkey's stronger position in the Black Sea. While Turkey has historically regarded the Black Sea as peripheral to its primary security concerns and has generally been willing to cede primacy in the region to Russia, the combination of Russian naval setbacks and Turkey's closure of the Turkish Straits to military traffic has resulted in a major shift in the power balance in the region between Russia and Turkey. As a result, Russia has sought to strengthen its relationship with Turkey, both by enhancing trade ties and energy exports and by encouraging Turkey's narrative of emphasizing regional ownership of the Black Sea rather than enhancing NATO's role there.<sup>13</sup> Maintaining a strong relationship with Turkey is likely to continue to be a cornerstone of Russia's regional policy for the foreseeable future.

Looking to the future, Russia will look to restore its position in the Black Sea once it is no longer consumed with fighting Ukraine. Rebuilding the heavily damaged Black Sea Fleet will be a top priority, as it will be critical if Russia is to reverse the loss of its control of the sea. A strong fleet will also be required to restore the ability to project power into the Mediterranean once Turkey reopens the Straits to military traffic. At that point, the fleet's mission of working to keep NATO forces out of the Black Sea will almost certainly have to be resumed as well.<sup>14</sup> On the political side, influence operations in the Caucasus and the eastern Balkans will continue as well, as Russia seeks to undermine Western cohesion while working to bring former Soviet states into its sphere of influence. Negotiating the balance of power between Russia and Turkey will occupy Russian strategic planners as well, as Turkey is likely to seek to retain its enhanced regional power while continuing to balance between Russia and its NATO allies.

## Russian interests and actions in the Mediterranean

Through centuries of competition between Russia and the West in the region, the Mediterranean has come to symbolize strength and influence. In periods when Russia has been weak, as it was after the Crimean War and the fall of the Soviet Union, its role in the Mediterranean has been greatly circumscribed and Western forces have been able to take control of the region. In contrast, when Russia is resurgent, it can compete in the region, typically symbolized by sending its naval forces into the Mediterranean. Therefore, in the eyes of Russian leadership, history has proven that a strong Russia has a substantial naval force in the Mediterranean. In addition to reflecting Russia's great power status and serving as a tool to assert influence in the region, a strong naval presence in the Mediterranean also allows Russia to better protect its southern approaches and facilitates Russian efforts to affect events on land.



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The Soviet experience has taught Russian naval planners that established port access is necessary for any kind of continuous Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Navy was forced to pull the bulk of its forces from the Mediterranean, maintaining only a modest logistics facility at Tartus in Syria. However, the importance of the Mediterranean region was not lost on the Russian leadership, and, as soon as the Russian military had the ships and fuel to again venture beyond Russia's shores, it began its resurgence in the region, officially announcing the rehabilitation of its Mediterranean presence in 2008. As tensions continued to flare in Syria, Russia re-formed its permanent task force in the Mediterranean in 2013, composed of ships from Russia's various fleets deploying to the region on a rotational basis.<sup>15</sup>

### **Goal #1: Use the Mediterranean's geographical position to protect Russia's security**

Located at the nexus of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, with access to the Black Sea, Azov Sea and Suez Canal and a gateway to the Atlantic, the Mediterranean provides a geographically favorable location for Moscow to pursue its foreign policy objectives and expand its influence and control into these regions. In addition, the Mediterranean is a part of several important trade routes connecting these various continents.

Most Russian military and security policies are driven by an intrinsic desire to guarantee Russian territorial integrity and sovereignty by warding off possible attacks and opposing any threats against the country. The most pressing issue for defense of the Russian state is the need to keep hostile forces from reaching too close to Russian territory.<sup>16</sup> Since 1991, the area southwest of Russia stretching from Moldova to the Caspian Sea has experienced a number of geopolitical challenges as the Western alliance has expanded its own influence in the region and diminished Russia's influence as a result. Therefore, Russia views a robust military force in the Mediterranean and the eventual creation of a southern bastion as helpful in safeguarding its southern flank from the perceived NATO naval threat.<sup>17</sup>

The Mediterranean naval squadron was established in part to act as a forward defense for southwestern Russia. Russian planners believed that the creation of a southern bastion in the Mediterranean would make it more difficult for NATO and other forces to gain access to Ukraine and several other countries in Russia's neighborhood in order to defend or protect them in a potential future contingency. During the period from 2015 to 2022, the squadron was gradually developed into a robust permanent naval force in the region, with the longstanding Russian naval logistics facility at Tartus being expanded into a full-fledged naval base. At its peak from 2020 to 2022, the Mediterranean squadron generally included two modern diesel electric submarines, one or two nuclear powered submarines, 3-5 large combatant surface ships, and a number of smaller combat ships and auxiliaries.<sup>18</sup> The squadron has regularly conducted exercises and operations throughout the Mediterranean, including with foreign navies such as China's.<sup>19</sup> One of the main strategic goals of the squadron's deployment has been to establish credible maritime conventional

deterrence versus NATO through the combination of air defenses and cruise missile-equipped ships, which work together to signal that any use of NATO naval forces against Russian ships and facilities would be highly costly for the adversary.<sup>20</sup>

## **Goal #2: Use local proxies to assert Russia's role as a key player in the Middle East**

Russia had long aspired to restore its status as an indispensable power in the Middle East. The civil war in Syria presented an opportunity for Russia to assert itself in the region, while at the same time potentially highlighting the weakness and unreliability of the United States to other Middle Eastern states. This was a large part of the context for Russia's 2015 intervention in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Syrian government.<sup>21</sup> Through its intervention, Russia sought to demonstrate itself as a credible ally to a country that had for decades been its most enduring ally in the Mediterranean region and the wider Arab world, while often playing up the fact that the United States had deserted one of its key allies in the region, Egypt, during the Arab Spring.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Russia sought to demonstrate the ability to stand up to Washington in an attempt to force a dialogue with the U.S. following a post-Crimean annexation breakdown in relations.

The intervention in Syria also had very practical goals for continued Russian presence in the Middle East, because of the role played by its Tartus naval base (and subsequently by its Khmeimim air base). As discussed above, a permanent presence in the Mediterranean allows Russia to project power and influence into the region while simultaneously restricting the freedom of Western countries to act in the area. This is valuable to Russia not only because it allows the country to create a forward line of defense in the area beyond its immediate Black Sea region, but also because of the symbolic value it provides for Russia as a significant outside power in the Middle East.

In the years after its successful intervention to keep Bashar al-Assad in power, Russia parlayed that success into stronger relationships both with a range of Arab Gulf states and also with Iran, traditionally a competitor of those states. This ability to play both sides of one of the major regional conflicts allowed to restore its Cold War-era role as an indispensable regional power.<sup>23</sup>

## **Goal #3: Increase relative Russian influence in the Mediterranean region**

The Mediterranean is essentially a microcosm of Russia's grand strategy to weaken the unity of the Western alliance and broaden Moscow's support base with the ultimate aim of revising the European security architecture in Russia's favor. Moscow views Southern Europe around the Mediterranean as the "weak flank" of NATO, because it sees the governments in many of these countries as more susceptible to Russian influence due to their political predilections and the rise of right-wing nationalist parties. Therefore, Russia believes that, by infiltrating these European societies and breaking down their will to defy Russian policies, it can create internal discord within the Western alliance. The reasoning suggests that if NATO is not able to display the cohesion





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necessary to successfully face challenges, the alliance will become less credible and Russia will appear more credible as a result, eventually altering the status quo in the region.<sup>24</sup>

Over the last decade, Russia has taken a range of actions to achieve this goal. At the peak of the Syrian civil war, Russia both encouraged migration from Syria into Europe and conducted influence operations to promote discontent in European societies about the arrival of migrants from the Middle East.<sup>25</sup> It also conducted more active destabilization campaigns in the region, including sponsoring an attempted coup d'état in Montenegro in 2016 and a campaign to undermine the 2018 Prespa agreement that resolved the naming dispute between North Macedonia and Greece.<sup>26</sup> More recently, Russia has worked to interfere in national elections in Romania and Moldova, as described above.

In the Mediterranean, Russia is attempting to break the image of the United States as the sole architect of regional security by inserting itself as an alternative pole. Moscow views today's environment as especially favorable for this endeavor, as the rise and success of far right and far left groups have increased internal conflict in many European countries and thereby made those countries more receptive to Russian influence.<sup>27</sup> In Moscow's view, if Russia could visibly establish its military might in the Mediterranean, other nations in the region would be required to maintain at least some ties with Moscow out of necessity, even if they did not entirely agree with Moscow's ideology.<sup>28</sup> Moscow hopes that the combination of these factors will bolster its position and diminish that of NATO in this strategically important region and, eventually, on a global scale.

After the success of its intervention in Syria allowed Russia to increase its influence in the Middle East, Russia has focused on using its strengthened position in the Mediterranean to expand its reach in North Africa. It has for many years supported Libyan groups opposed to groups supported by the United States and West European states, most notably the Libyan National Army led by Khalifa Haftar. Russia began to deploy mercenary troops to Libya in 2018 and Russian mercenaries fought alongside Haftar's forces in an ultimately unsuccessful battle for Tripoli in 2019. Even though Russia has suffered from shortages of ground forces at various points since it launched its full scale invasion of Ukraine, approximately 2000 Russian mercenary troops remain in eastern Libya at the present time and Russia has repositioned some equipment and personnel to Libya from Syria after fall of the al-Assad regime.<sup>29</sup> Libya has in turn played an important role in expanding Russian influence operations elsewhere in Africa, serving as a logistics hub for Russian operations in Sudan, Chad, Niger and elsewhere in the Sahel and Central Africa.<sup>30</sup> Russia's effort to increase its influence in Africa has been an increasingly significant part of its effort to raise Russia's status as an alternative world power to the United States and Russia's outpost in Libya is playing an increasingly critical role in this effort, especially given the likely loss of Russia's position and bases in Syria.

## Linkages and interactions

The Black Sea and the Mediterranean have always been linked in Russia's geopolitical and maritime strategies. In the maritime sphere, the Black Sea has traditionally played a key role in Russia's ability to project power into the Mediterranean. During the Cold War, the majority of ships in the Soviet Union's 5<sup>th</sup> Operational Squadron came from the Black Sea Fleet. After the Mediterranean Squadron was reestablished by the Russian Navy in 2013, the Black Sea Fleet once again became the primary supplier of ships for Russia's naval forces in the Mediterranean. In addition to enabling the modernization of the Black Sea Fleet, the annexation and subsequent militarization of Crimea in 2014 was a significant step towards the implementation of the southern bastion concept described above.<sup>31</sup> The critical role of the Black Sea Fleet in enabling Russia's maritime advancement in the Mediterranean continued over the next decade, with both surface ships and submarines from the fleet forming the core of the squadron until the Turkish Straits were closed in 2022. Logistical support for the squadron was also provided largely from the Black Sea. Furthermore, support for Russian and Syrian troops in Syria primarily transited from Black Sea bases to the Tartus naval facility through what was informally known as the "Syrian Express."<sup>32</sup>

The Russian air force has played a complementary role in Russian military power projection in the Mediterranean region. Russian operated airbases in Syria were a key transit and refueling point for aircraft that depart from bases on Russian territory in the Black Sea region transporting supplies and personnel throughout Africa, including to Sudan and the Central African Republic.<sup>33</sup> The loss of this base makes resupply of Russia's Africa operations far more difficult, since airfields in Libya are too distant for Russian transport aircraft to reach without a refueling stop or a direct route over countries that to date have not allowed Russian military aircraft to transit their airspace. The lack of alternatives will potentially make Russia dependent on Turkey for overflight permission or, potentially, to have to make significant concessions to Syria in order to retain at least some access to Khmeimim and Tartus bases.<sup>34</sup>

In terms of a larger geopolitical perspective, Russia has repeatedly shown that it needs to have a secure rear base in the Black Sea in order to have influence in the Middle East and larger Mediterranean region. For the first 25 years after the end of the Cold War, Russia was largely absent from both the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Although it announced the reconstitution of the Mediterranean squadron in 2013, it was only able to establish a consistent naval presence in the Mediterranean after it annexed Crimea and rebuilt the Black Sea Fleet. The closure of the Turkish Straits has thus created a serious problem for Russia's ability to maintain its role in the region. It has sought to use non-military means to achieve its goals, including using the energy weapon to damage economies and influence operations aimed at destabilizing anti-Russian states throughout both the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions, especially throughout the Balkans. However, these efforts have been mostly unsuccessful and have in fact caused a decrease in Russian influence in countries such as Greece, Montenegro, and Moldova.



By closing the Turkish Straits to warships, Turkey has effectively severed Russia's ability to use the Black Sea as a rear base from which to project power to the Mediterranean. This setback was further combined with a reduction in Russian forces in Syria as a result of the unsurprising prioritization of the war with Ukraine by the Russian military. The eventual result was a loss of influence in the Middle East, made clear by Russia's inability to provide support for the al-Assad regime as it faced a renewed rebel offensive in late 2024. This strategic setback is likely to have knock-on strategic effects in the wider region by making it more difficult for Russia to conduct its military and security assistance operations in North and Central Africa.

### The successes and failures of Russia's strategy in the Black Sea and Mediterranean

For much of the last ten years, Russia has effectively used a combination of tools and instruments of power to carry out an effective strategy to rebuild its position in the Black Sea and Mediterranean. These tools have included traditional diplomacy, military (and especially naval) power, mercenaries, and influence operations, which together have worked to undermine US and NATO positions in the region while strengthening Russia's power and influence. After a series of successes from 2014 to 2022, the Russia's more recent record in the region is far more mixed. This concluding section briefly discusses these successes and failures with the goal of providing a sense of the factors that lead to Russian success or failure and the likely trajectory of Russian strategy in the region in the near term.

In the period from 2014 to 2019, Russia achieved a series of military and political victories in the Black Sea/Mediterranean region that had the effect of greatly strengthening its strategic position. These successes began with the almost bloodless annexation of Crimea in 2014, which not only enabled Russia to modernize and strengthen its Black Sea Fleet, but also allowed it effectively to control the Black Sea given the peninsula's geographic position. Subsequent militarization of Crimea included the doubling of the number of military personnel stationed on the peninsula and a sixfold increase in the number of armored vehicles and combat aircraft based there.<sup>35</sup>

The increase in military presence in Crimea was a necessary condition for Russia's next move, the military operation in Syria that began in 2015 and allowed Russia to maintain Bashar al-Assad in power for an additional ten years. Crimea served as the launch point for the so-called "Syrian Express" logistics operation, which provided supplies initially for the Syrian military and subsequently for Russian forces stationed in Syria.<sup>36</sup> The establishment and expansion of Russian military bases in Syria in turn allowed Russia to expand its naval operations in the Mediterranean and to begin a major influence operation in Africa, with the Syrian bases serving as key logistics nodes in the supply chain for both efforts.

While Russia's operations extend throughout Africa and therefore go far beyond the Mediterranean, Russian bases in Syria and Libya have played a critical role in supplying Russian regular and mercenary forces throughout the continent, while PMC Wagner leaders in Libya were

directly involved in expanding Russian operations into the Sahel and Central Africa. These operations began in 2017, and that timeline reinforces the importance of Russia's expanded maritime presence in the Mediterranean that began in 2015 for subsequent African operations.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, not all of Russia's operations during this period were successful. As already discussed, Russia's influence operations in the Balkans and in the Black Sea region have had mixed success. While Georgia has over time moved closer to Russia, the publicization of Russian efforts to turn Balkan countries against the West have had a boomerang effect, decreasing Russia's popularity in Greece, Montenegro, and Romania, pushing Montenegro to join NATO, and creating a diplomatic crisis between Greece and Russia. Similarly, Russia has had a mixed record in its efforts to create tensions between Turkey and its NATO allies. On the one hand, the sale of Russian S-400 missiles created serious problems for the Turkey-NATO defense relationship, while Russian efforts to create economic dependencies between Russia and Turkey by turning Turkey into an energy transit hub have also been relatively successful.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, neither tensions with NATO nor energy ties have prevented Turkey from helping Azerbaijan defeat Armenian forces in Karabakh in 2020 and 2023, closing the Turkish Straits to Russian warships in 2022, or helping Syrian rebel forces overthrow the al-Assad regime in 2024.

Since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia's regional strategy has suffered repeated setbacks, first as a result of Ukraine's defeat of Russian naval forces in the Battle of the Black Sea in 2023-24, and then in the loss of Syria in 2024. These setbacks highlight the cumulative nature of Russia's losses in the region. Much as earlier gains were cumulative, with initial success in the Black Sea allowing for expanded ambitions in Syria and subsequently in North Africa, the end of connectivity between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean contributed to a loss of dominance over the Black Sea and subsequently to Russia's inability to protect its Syrian ally. As of this writing, it remains to be seen whether Russia will be able to stabilize the situation, potentially by making an agreement with the new Syrian government to retain at least partial base access,<sup>39</sup> or if the loss in Syria weakens Russia's ability to continue its influence operations in Africa.

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