

SECURITY INSIGHTS



Russia's Naval Strategy in the Mediterranean By Dmitry Gorenburg

Executive Summary

- Over the last decade, Russia has expanded its military footprint in the Mediterranean. Since establishing its Mediterranean Squadron in 2013, it has largely maintained a permanent naval presence in the region, based primarily on ships from the Black Sea Fleet, with support from ships and submarines of the Northern and Baltic Fleets.
- Russia's strategy uses the Mediterranean's geography to protect Russia's southern flanks while seeking to challenge the naval supremacy of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United States in the eastern Mediterranean. Russia depends on maintaining and gradually expanding its naval presence in the Mediterranean while also securing expanded access to ports and bases, with the possibility of eventually contesting NATO's dominance in the central Mediterranean as well.
- Although the Russian Navy's missions in the Mediterranean are primarily related to coastal defense and protection of territorial waters, conventional deterrence has come to play an increasingly important role since the development of a ship-based cruise missile capability. The Russian Navy has sought 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.

Russia's Strategic Goals

Russia's strategy in the Mediterranean is focused on three key goals: taking advantage of the Mediterranean's geographical position to improve Russia's security, using Russia's position in the Mediterranean to increase Russia's status as an alternative world power to the United States, and providing support for the Syrian regime. The strategy has three key elements. The first element is the positioning of a credible military force in the Mediterranean. A permanent force in the region is important for several Russian objectives, including protecting Russian approaches and reducing Russia's vulnerability to surprise.

This force also affords Russia more flexibility and capability in countering Western activities in the Mediterranean, grants Russia more-ready access to the world's oceans, reduces the time needed to shuttle forces and platforms to the region in case of a conflict, and gives Russia a constant presence for spreading influence in the surrounding countries.

The second element of the strategy consists of an effort to secure allies and partners in the region with the goal of increasing port access for Russia's naval squadron. Although Syria remains the critical ally for Russia, efforts to enhance cooperation with Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, and other states have been successful to a greater or lesser extent.

The third element of the strategy builds on the second and focuses on establishing naval bases in the region—an effort successful only in Syria, so far. A base in the central Mediterranean, such as in Libya, would be particularly important from a strategic point of view, allowing Russia to expand its naval footprint beyond the eastern Mediterranean.

Without access granted by allies in the Mediterranean, a standing military presence, and regional basing, Moscow would likely find it more difficult to conduct operations in pursuit of its overarching strategic goals in the region. Were the three elements achieved, the Russian military would be in a much more favorable position in the event of hostilities or conflict in the Mediterranean.

Russia's Naval Capabilities in the Mediterranean

In 2013, Russia reestablished a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea with its Mediterranean Squadron. The Black Sea Fleet (BSF) has been the primary supplier of ships and logistics for the squadron.¹ Since 2014, the BSF has acquired six new attack submarines, three frigates, and several patrol ships and small missile ships. In conjunction with these acquisitions, Russia has begun major overhauls of some of its Soviet-era ships. Russia has moved air defense batteries into Crimea, where these batteries provide further cover for Russian platforms operating in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean. The introduction of multiple platforms armed with long-range cruise missiles, and the addition of air defense batteries in Crimea, has fundamentally changed the way the Black Sea Fleet operates. Armed with *Kalibr* missile systems, which have a demonstrated range of 1,500–2,000 km, the fleet's newest ships can strike distant targets from well-protected zones near Russia's coastline in Crimea and Novorossiysk.²

Since the addition of six *Varshavyanka*-class submarines to the BSF in 2017, Russia has stationed two such vessels in Tartus, Syria. Surface ships and submarines from Russia's other fleets, mainly the Northern and Baltic, have participated in squadron operations at various times as well. The force has actively contributed to Russia's military operations in Syria. In addition to delivering troops, BSF vessels have fired *Kalibr* missiles at ground targets throughout Syria. Russian ships have also shadowed U.S. ships in the eastern Mediterranean, and Russian

¹ Thomas Fedyszyn, "The Russian Navy 'Rebalances' to the Mediterranean," *USNI Proceedings*, December 2013, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2013/december/russian-navy-rebalances-mediterranean>.

² Dmitry Gorenburg, "Is a new Russian Black Sea Fleet coming? Or is it here?" *War on the Rocks*, July 31, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/is-a-new-russian-black-sea-fleet-coming-or-is-it-here/>.

submarines deployed to the Mediterranean have tracked U.S. and NATO platforms there as well.³ The squadron has also facilitated Russian naval diplomacy efforts, as ships from the squadron have called at ports at Cyprus, Egypt, and Malta.

The BSF will continue to acquire new ships during the next ten years, allowing Russia to increase the number of ships potentially able to deploy for operations in the Mediterranean. In addition, Russia has strengthened its air and air defense forces in the Mediterranean, positioning a range of tactical combat aircraft at its air base in Syria and having demonstrated the ability to surge long-range aviation into the Mediterranean from bases in Russian territory. Russian defenses can control the entire Black Sea from Crimea, including all approaches to Russian coastal areas. Russia has been deploying similar protective capabilities in the eastern Mediterranean, including placing S-400 and S-300 air defense systems, *Bastion* and *Bal* coastal defense systems, and *Pantsir* point-defense systems together with air force and naval units. Although the political geography of the region and the more-limited nature of Russian forces there mean that Moscow does not have the same kind of defensive control as it does in the Black Sea, its forces in the Mediterranean are strong enough to present a potent challenge to U.S. and NATO naval dominance in the region.

The Missions of the Russian Navy

Strategic deterrence remains the most important mission for the Russian Navy globally, but coastal defense and control of territorial waters are a close second and are paramount concerns in the Black Sea and Mediterranean. Russia has traditionally considered coastal defense to mean simply keeping foreign navies away from the Russian coast; since 2015, however, the coastal-defense mission has come to encompass protection of Russian forces in Syria as well. Furthermore, over the last decade, the Russian Navy has increasingly focused on improving its ability to work closely with Russian ground forces and the Russian air force in joint operations. This coordination was on display as early as 2014, when all of the services worked closely together to move forces to Crimea as part of the operation that resulted in Russia's annexation of that region. Since that time, Russia has repeatedly focused its military exercises on joint operations. The positive effects of that focus have been evident in Russian naval operations in and near Syria, where Russian naval forces have coordinated closely with Russian air and ground forces both in striking targets on shore and in transporting personnel and equipment for Russian operations.

Russia is achieving its coastal-defense mission primarily through capability development rather than platform acquisition. This is why the Russian Navy is not as concerned as some Western analysts think it should be about the difficulties and delays it has faced in building large surface ships. Instead, it has built a large number of smaller patrol ships and corvettes that are highly capable in anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) operations. The idea is that the Russian Navy can use these ships to create maritime zones that are difficult for enemy forces to penetrate. These

³ "Russia Strengthens the Mediterranean Squadron," Russia Monitor, Warsaw Institute, March 27, 2018, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russia-strengthens-mediterranean-squadron/>.

“A2/AD bubbles” in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean form a set of layered defenses and multiple vectors of attack through the combination of long-range sea-, air-, and ground-launched missiles used to deny access, with shorter-range coastal and air defense systems focused on area denial.⁴ As part of the coastal-defense mission, the Russian Navy will seek to establish credible maritime conventional deterrence against NATO through the combination of air defenses and cruise missile-equipped ships, which will work together to highlight that any use of NATO naval forces against Russian ships and facilities would be highly costly for the adversary.

In contrast, the Russian Navy has a relatively limited focus on traditional power projection and expeditionary warfare in the Mediterranean. Russia’s largest naval surface ships are Soviet legacy vessels that are becoming less reliable over time. Most of the new surface ships being built are relatively small and are unlikely to deploy far beyond Russia’s naval outposts in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean. As a result, power projection will be largely based on the new generation of advanced *Kilo*-class diesel submarines and the regular presence of one or two cruise missile-carrying nuclear submarines deployed to the Mediterranean from the Northern Fleet. Russia’s legacy fleet of Soviet-era surface ships will continue to focus on status projection, carrying out port visits and similar activities to project the image of a great power. The Russian Navy also has a fairly limited expeditionary capability. Its small number of aging landing ships have reached the limit of their operational capacity in supporting Russia’s operations in Syria.

Constraints on Russian Naval Operations in the Mediterranean

The Russian Navy’s future plans in the Mediterranean face several constraints. On the financing side, Moscow invested heavily in naval procurement as part of the 2011-2020 State Armament Program. It was not willing to maintain such a high level of spending for the next ten years, especially given the constraints on overall military spending resulting from a relatively stagnant economic situation. As a result, the Russian Navy appears likely to be the biggest loser in the 2027 State Armament Program.⁵

On the shipbuilding side, most Russian naval construction projects have faced significant delays. This is due to the combination of a long-term decline in naval research and development that is only starting to be reversed, an inability to modernize its shipbuilding industry, budgetary constraints that have forced the government to make tradeoffs about which construction and modernization programs to fund, and the end of defense cooperation with Ukrainian and Western suppliers in the aftermath of the 2014 conflict with Ukraine.

⁴ Jonathan Altman, “Russian A2/AD in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Growing Risk,” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 69: No. 1, January 2016, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol69/iss1/5>.

⁵ Dmitry Gorenburg, “Russia’s Military Modernization Plans: 2018–2027,” PONARS Eurasia, Policy Memo 495, November 2017, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/russias-military-modernization-plans-2018-2027>.

In terms of industrial capacity, most of Russia's shipyards are not in the best shape. The Sevmash and Admiralty shipyards are exceptions and reveal the importance attached to submarine construction over surface ships. Russia's other shipyards have generally been very slow in building ships. The situation has not been helped by the disruption of supply chains as a result of Western sanctions. Until the advent of Western sanctions in 2014, many key components were purchased from abroad. Although this disruption has been most evident in the cases of gas turbines and diesel engines, Moscow has also experienced problems with the acquisition of various electronic components and precision machine tools. For several years, therefore, the acquisition and development of advanced components were the biggest constraint on the construction of new ships with modern systems. However, most of these issues are now being resolved through the development of domestic alternatives, so faster naval construction is likely in the future.

Russia also faces operational challenges in naval operations in the Mediterranean. The primary challenge is one of logistics and bringing platforms to the fight. The Turkish Straits would likely be a severe hindrance to sending reinforcements and to Russia's ability to redeploy back to the Black Sea in the event of a conflict involving NATO, especially if Turkey continues to follow the strictures of the Montreux Convention. Additionally, Russian intermediate-range bombers would likely face challenges transiting from Russia to the airspace over Syria.

Because of these challenges, Russian leadership would, prior to any outbreak in the eastern Mediterranean, have to choose whether to fight in the Mediterranean or attempt to bring forces back to the Black Sea to defend Russia's southern borders. Should Russian forces stay in the Mediterranean, they would pose a serious threat to U.S. and NATO forces by creating an increasingly dense missile and electronic-warfare environment farther into the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Russia would have to expect that it would lose these forces to an ultimately numerically and qualitatively superior enemy force, albeit after exacting a potentially high cost on its adversary.

Russia's Future Naval Role in the Mediterranean

In the future, the BSF is expected to support an even larger Mediterranean squadron, with a constant presence of one to two multipurpose submarines from the Northern Fleet and 10–15 surface ships (primarily from the BSF). Russia's efforts to expand its presence in the Mediterranean would also require the establishment of more and bigger bases in the region. Such bases would not just provide an opportunity for refueling and repair of ships: They could also house coastal defensive systems that would protect the squadron.

In the near to medium term, the Russian Navy's role will be to serve primarily as a deterrence force to constrain U.S. and NATO operations in the eastern Mediterranean and to provide forward defense for approaches to the Russian homeland through the Black Sea. It will have some power projection through its ability to hold opponents' territory at risk with its cruise

missile capability, rather than through traditional naval strike groups. Out-of-area deployment capability will increasingly shift to smaller patrol ships and to submarines as Russia's remaining Soviet-era large surface ships become increasingly less reliable.

Over the last decade, there has been a transition in the Russian Navy's future planning from unattainable blue-water aspirations to establishing a fairly capable green-water force. Its overall focus remains defensive in the near term, with the possibility of greater emphasis on power projection in the medium term as more *Yasen*-class nuclear attack submarines come online and older Soviet submarines are armed with *Kalibr* cruise missiles as part of ongoing modernization plans.

This future force has the potential to threaten the naval forces of the United States and its allies with land-attack and antiship cruise missiles based on small ships in enclosed seas that are highly protected from attack and with difficult-to-detect modern submarines. The result will be a Russian Navy that, compared with the past, has much greater firepower and offensive range despite its dependence on relatively small platforms. This capability will make the Russian Navy a far more potent regional threat by the mid-2020s than it has been for several decades.

The Mediterranean will play a key role in Russian naval strategy because of its strategic significance as an access point to southern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. For Russia, the Mediterranean symbolizes the larger competition between Moscow and Washington. By building up its naval forces, Russia is hoping to circumscribe NATO access to the region, protect Russia's southern flank, and assist its current and potential future client states in the region. At the same time, maintaining forces in the eastern Mediterranean is less of a priority for Russian strategy than defending the homeland. Maintaining naval presence in the Mediterranean is a far more effective strategy for the Russian Navy than pursuing a globally active blue-water navy because Russia has neither the resources nor the global ambitions to challenge U.S. naval supremacy around the world. Moscow's focus on developing and augmenting the Mediterranean squadron is thus a far more achievable limited objective that is well-aligned with Russia's foreign policy objectives in the region.

About the Author

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