

SECURITY INSIGHTS



New Perspectives on the Black Sea Theater in Russian Strategic Culture

By Pavel K. Baev

Executive Summary

Most cases of Russia's direct use of military force—including two wars in Chechnya in 1999 and 2004, and the August 2008 war with Georgia—happened in the wider Black Sea region. The configuration of this theater has changed significantly with the Russian annexation of Crimea in spring 2014, the ensuing combat operations in eastern Ukraine, and even more drastically with the military intervention in Syria in autumn 2015. Russian strategic culture is still internalizing these new changes, and has acquired some new features.

- Russia has gained effective military dominance over the core of the Black Sea theater with the fortification of Crimea and the deployment of long-range anti-air and -ship missiles systems and surveillance and target acquisition radars.
- This dominance remains poorly consolidated, because there is no integrated command structure for the mixed military grouping in the Crimea.
- Russia finds it difficult to convert this military dominance into political power and seeks to exacerbate discord in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) by cultivating a “strategic partnership” with Turkey.
- Many Russian military “footprints” in the periphery of the Black Sea theater—in Transdniestria, South Ossetia, Armenia—are isolated and strategically vulnerable.
- Success of the military intervention in Syria is highly uncertain in the post-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) phase of the civil war; its sustainability depends upon the uninterrupted delivery of supplies through the Turkish Straits.
- The Syria intervention has exposed the Russian military—particularly the Black Sea fleet—to a sustained overstretch of resources.
- Managing and overcoming this overstretch in the context of shrinking resources has become a high-risk feature of Russian strategic culture.

Introduction

In post-Soviet Russian strategic culture, a wide-ranging integrative perspective on the Black Sea theater is a relatively new addition. In the 1990s and 2000s, Russia engaged in forceful conflict management in the Caucasus (including the two Chechen wars). This was performed separately from the complex diplomatic and energy maneuvering in regional forums, such as the Black Sea

Economic Cooperation (which is, at present, practically defunct). The August 2008 war with Georgia did not significantly alter that separation, and the Black Sea fleet continued to degrade. It was the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in Spring 2014 that allowed for and necessitated a complex integrative reconfiguration of the Black Sea theater. The intervention in Syria in autumn 2015 added more depth and priority to this perspective.

Russia's new strength, vis-à-vis NATO's southeastern flank, has attracted research attention in the established think tanks and new schools of critical security analysis.¹ Yet too often, the aggregation of data on the rapid strengthening of the capabilities deployed around the Black Sea leads to elliptic conclusions; for example, "[i]t remains uncertain how far Russia is willing and able to further enhance its military presence to counter what it perceives as a threatening NATO military build-up..."² The profound and rapidly evolving impact of the transformation of military-security interactions in the wider Black Sea region on Russian strategic culture deserves a more rigorous assessment.

Ineffectual Dominance over the Core

Large-scale fortification of Crimea has granted Russia an effective strategic dominance over the core of the Black Sea theater – the maritime space of the sea itself and its immediate littoral. Of key importance for establishing control over the water and airspace is the deployment of the S-400 *Triumph* surface-to-air and K-300P *Bastion-P* coastal defense missile systems (effective range of about 400 km), supported by the *Monolit-B* and other radars providing long-range surveillance, early warning, and target acquisition. Modernized air bases host an air force division and two regiments of naval aviation, which together have about 100 fixed-wing fighter and ground-attack aircraft, and have capacity for accommodating reinforcements. The Black Sea fleet itself is strengthened primarily with six improved *Kilo*-class (Project 636.3) diesel submarines (this brigade is based in Novorossiysk), which has granted it new capabilities for projecting power on shore with the long-range *Kalibr* 3M54 cruise missiles.

Most of these efforts had been completed by the end of 2017, when the Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov asserted that a "self-sufficient" (*samodostatochnaya*) grouping of forces had been built in Crimea.³ There are still serious issues with the cohesion and interoperability of this grouping. Unlike in the Kaliningrad region, there is no integrated command structure for the units belonging to the Airspace Forces, the Navy, and other services, and the overall command

¹ See for instance, a series of four essays by Boris Toucas published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in 2017 and 2018. The last of these essays is Boris Toucas, "Turkey Has No Allies in the Black Sea, Only Interests," Center for Strategic Studies, February 13, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkey-has-no-allies-black-sea-only-interests>. See also articles by Michael Petersen, Dmitry Gorenburg, and Chris Miller in the series "Black Sea's Back" published in the *War on the Rocks* in 2018; the first of these pieces is Chris Miller, "Black Sea's Back, Alright?" *War on the Rocks*, July 26, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/category/special-series/black-seas-back/>. See also Grzegorz Kuczynski, *Mare Nostrum Strategy: Russian Military Activity in the Black Sea*, Warsaw Institute Special Report, March 21, 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/mare-nostrum-strategy-russian-military-activity-black-sea/>.

² Alexandra Klimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Russia and Black Sea Security*, SIPRI Background Paper, December 2018, p. 17, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2018/sipri-background-papers/russia-and-black-sea-security>.

³ See the transcript of Gerasimov's presentation at the session of Defense Ministry Collegium on November 7, 2017 (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, "Vystuplenie nachal'nika general'nogo shtaba Vooruzhenikh Sil Rossiskoi Federatsii," November 7, 2017, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12149743@egNews.)

functions are performed by the Southern Military District headquarters, located in Rostov-on-Don. Southern Military District headquarters has been traditionally dominated by Army generals, and focuses its attention primarily on managing conflicts in the Caucasus, and on the smoldering hostilities in the Donbass war zone. The traditional disconnect between the ground forces and the Navy is aggravated by the effective autonomy of the main naval base in Sevastopol, which, administratively, is not a part of Crimea.

A major deficiency of “fortress Crimea” is the poor interoperability between various elements of the military grouping. It is uncertain, for instance, how well integrated the long-, medium-, and short-range air defense assets (respectively, S-400, S-300, and *Pantsir-S1*) are, but it is quite certain that they are not integrated with long- and medium-range coastal defense missile systems (*Bastion-P* and *Bal*). Russian military strategy does not have a concept resembling anti-access/area denial (A2/AD), and there is no credible evidence of progress in strategic thinking in this direction.⁴ The much-advertised new weapon systems, like the Kh-47M2 *Kinzhal* air-launched ballistic missile, which is test-deployed with MiG-31K fighters in the Southern Military District (not in Crimea), are also performing entirely separate tasks.⁵ Russian fighters often make too-crude intercepts of U.S. and NATO ships and aircraft in the Black Sea, and Russia can announce closure of large parts of its waters for missile tests while breaching into waters closed for NATO exercises. However, its capacity for performing operations similar to the (now-abandoned by U.S. command) Air-Sea Battle doctrine is limited, and can hardly be improved in the near-term.⁶

Vulnerabilities in the Vast Periphery

Moscow might not have a clear idea about how to utilize its military dominance in the core of the Black Sea theater, but it cannot fail to see the multiple vulnerabilities in its positions in its broad periphery. Its symbolic military presence in Transdnistria (Moldova) is isolated by a hostile Ukraine; the base in Armenia is cut off by Georgia; and its occupation of South Ossetia depends on supplies delivered from North Ossetia through the 3,750 meters long Roki tunnel. These specific military issues translate into problems with maintaining geopolitical dominance. Russia’s only ally in the Caucasus, Armenia, is locked in a protracted conflict with Azerbaijan and in the spring of 2018 experienced the “velvet revolution,” which Moscow disapproved of as a matter of principle. Russia has only limited influence on political turbulence in Moldova, finds its pressure on Georgia to be rather counterproductive, and cannot sort out the messy turmoil in occupied Abkhazia. Russian geopolitical maneuvering in the region is restricted and undercut by heavy-impact conflict with Ukraine, which is driven by the deadlocked hostilities in the Donbass war zone. Even Turkey, which Moscow cultivates as a “strategic partner,” has unequivocally rejected of the annexation of Crimea.⁷

In Russian geopolitical perspective, the Black Sea theater now extends into the eastern Mediterranean, and the intervention in Syria is both a major asset for projecting Russia’s power

⁴ Keir Giles and Mathieu Boulege, “Russia’s A2/AD Capabilities: Real and Imagined,” *Parameters*, Vol. 49, No 1-2, Spring-Summer 2019, pp. 21–26.

⁵ “MiG-31 with Kinzhal missiles performed more than 380 sorties over the Black and Caspian seas,” TASS, February 20, 2019, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/6138865>.

⁶ B.J. Armstrong, “The Shadow of Air-Sea Battle and the Sinking of A2AD”, *War on the Rocks*, October 5, 2016 <https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/the-shadow-of-air-sea-battle-and-the-sinking-of-a2ad/>.

⁷ Joanna Hosa, “Ukraine’s broadening horizons”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 14 August 2019 (https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_ukraine_broadening_horizons_erdogan_zelensky).

in this direction and a serious vulnerability. The Khmeimim airbase and the Tartus naval facility are useful “footprints” in the region, but the scale of military presence is barely above symbolic (not least because the Black Sea fleet cannot spare any surface combatants to be deployed there).

This infrastructure is exposed to serious risks, including terrorist attacks, and gets Russia entangled in the pulsating military confrontation between Iran and Israel. Even the small-scale military intervention remaining in Syria needs a significant inflow of supplies, which can only be delivered through the Turkish Straits, and Turkey is a stubbornly difficult partner for Russia in managing the Syrian war. Moscow has found it profitable to build strategic partnership with Turkey (including selling it the S-400 surface-to-air missile system) in order to stimulate discord in NATO.⁸ From the military-strategic perspective, however, Turkey remains anchored in NATO and must be treated as a potential adversary that can close the Bosphorus bottleneck and provide crucial support for the deployment of U.S. Navy assets into the Black Sea.

Russian strategic culture has eagerly internalized the proposition that small applications of military power, augmented by innovative “hybrid” means, could produce big geostrategic impacts in the expanded Black Sea theater. Now it struggles with acknowledging the possibility that small setbacks from the Balkans to the Caucasus are merging, creating a negative geopolitical trend of erosion of Russia’s influence and turning its assets into vulnerabilities.

The Culture of Overstretch

By every reasonable account, Russia’s strategic positions in the wider Black Sea theater are threatened by military overstretch. The Black Sea fleet is the best example of this: its flagship cruiser, *Moskva*, has been withdrawn from the combat order for overhaul after long Mediterranean cruises (as is the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* from the Northern fleet). A brigade of seven landing ships (anywhere from 30 to 55 years old) is severely overworked from delivering supplies to Syria.⁹ New additions to this fleet, including three *Admiral Grigorovich*-class frigates, cannot reduce this overstretch and can even add to the problem, as the naval bases in Sevastopol and Novorossiysk cannot provide proper maintenance.¹⁰ For the Navy command, the only way to deal with this situation is to push the subordinates even harder, extending the service life of old ships, cutting corners with logistics, and demanding heroic efforts from sailors.

This pattern of defying and overcoming the gap between available capabilities and ambitious tasks has deep roots in Russian strategic culture, and the pattern has developed new features as Russia continues on the path of deeply asymmetric confrontation with the West. The sustained drive to exploit its material assets and human resources to the maximum level of stress inevitably generates a high risk of technical failures and other accidents, such as the sinking of the intelligence vessel *Liman* outside Bosphorus in 2017, or the crush-landing of the An-26 transport plane at the Khmeimim airbase in 2018. Dangerous intercepts of U.S. planes over the Black Sea fit the same pattern of risk-taking, and the forceful capture of three Ukrainian vessels near the

⁸ Mehmet Yegin, “Turkey Between NATO and Russia: The Failed Balance,” German Institute for International and Security Affairs, June 30, 2019, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019C30/>.

⁹ Pavel K. Baev, “Russia Builds Up and Cuts Down its Naval Power,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 237, June 2019, pp. 6–9.

¹⁰ Igor Delanoe, *Russia’s Black Sea Fleet: Toward a Multiregional Force*, Arlington, Va.: Center for Naval Analyses, June 2019.

Kerch Strait in November 2018 demonstrated Russia's readiness to engage in direct encounters.¹¹ Russian high command tends to see the ability to set the level of acceptable risk much higher than the Western military as an important strategic advantage, and sees no reason to alter this cavalier attitude, even when facing the consequences of such alarming disasters as the failed test of a secret nuclear weapon system outside Severodvinsk in August 2019.¹²

All-penetrating corruption has compromised the military's top-down demands, resulting in the mobilization of "heroic" efforts in order to overcome accumulating stress and risks. This has also become a major feature of Russian strategic culture. Corruption affects military structures in many forms: from plain embezzlement to training and exploiting mercenaries (though private military contractors are illegal in Russia). The export of corruption is also used as a "hybrid" instrument in Russian security policy, which targets such states as Bulgaria and Cyprus, but the returns on these "investments" are dwindling to strategically insignificant.¹³

Conclusions

The key features of the Black Sea theater have changed drastically in the last five years, and Russian strategic culture is struggling to internalize new conflict configurations and the dynamics of confrontation with the West in this vast and complex area. Moscow has sought to maximize the advantages of establishing dominance at the core of this theater (which was secured by the annexation and fortification of Crimea) by courting Turkey, interfering with NATO exercises, and blocking the Kerch Strait for Ukrainian ships. At the same time, it needs to face the vulnerability of its many "footprints" in the vast periphery of this theater, which stretches from Transnistria in Moldova, to South Ossetia in Georgia, and further to Syria.

The majority of Russian post-Soviet experiments and exercises in projecting military power have happened in the wider Black Sea theater, and they have left Moscow in possession of many ugly "trophies," from Chechnya—controlled by the despotic Kadyrov regime—to unstable Abkhazia and hard-to-reach Transnistria. Three of these forceful engagements are ongoing and require either sustained application of land power (the Donbass war zone), naval power (Eastern Mediterranean) or airpower (Syria). This drain of resources makes the Black Sea theater a major consumer of shrinking budget allocations for the Russian Armed Forces, and cases a sustained overstretch of military assets and capabilities in the Southern Military District

In Russian strategic culture, this overstretch is increasingly perceived as the norm, while the readiness to accept the high risk of technical accidents and human errors perceived as an advantage over the risk-averse West. Despite the setbacks in "hybrid operations" in the Balkans and the failure to prevent the "velvet revolution" in Armenia, Russian political leadership.

¹¹ Michael Cruickshank, "Investigating the Kerch Strait Incident," Bellingcat, November 30, 2018 <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/11/30/investigating-the-kerch-strait-incident/>.

¹² Ryan Pickrell, "Here's Why the Russian Military Has So Many Serious Accidents," *Business Insider*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-the-russian-military-has-so-many-serious-accidents-2019-8?r=US&IR=T>.

¹³ Borzou Daragahi, "Are Bulgaria's Strings Still Being Pulled by the Kremlin?" *Independent*, April 23, 2019.

remains in denial of Russia's diminishing ability to manage multiple conflicts in the Black Sea theater. The high command may be more aware of the actual and potential costs of mixing newly-mastered "hybrid" means with overworked military capabilities, but it is not eager to contradict the opinions of the influential bosses of the special services in President Vladimir Putin's court. It is entirely possible that the next attempt at projecting military power for the purpose of consolidating the Putin regime's slackening grasp on power will once again occur in this trouble-rich geopolitical space.

About the Author

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