



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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Russia's Strategic Outlook and the Black Sea

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There are two main vectors in the foreign strategy of modern Russia. One is to dominate Russia's neighbors and restore its empire in a new form. The other is directed against the interests of the Western states and at increasing Russia's influence in parts of the world beyond its immediate neighborhood. From Moscow's perspective, the Black Sea region has a place within both of these vectors.

The importance of the Black Sea region for Russia's ambitions of imperial restoration is obvious enough – the Black Sea abuts the whole southwestern flank of the Moscow-envisioned 'Eurasia' meaning the Russian Federation plus the territories that it wants to directly or indirectly control. In this regard, Russian purposes are twofold. First, Moscow seeks to militarily constrain the United States and other NATO members in the Black Sea. In the event of another international crisis in the Black Sea region, Russia wishes practical options for the Western states to be as limited as possible. Second, Russians have shown that they are willing to use their superior military position in the Black Sea to target Ukraine and Georgia through the maritime domain. Undermining the sovereignty of these two Black Sea countries has been among Moscow's strategic priorities and maritime activities are among the tools in the wide-ranging arsenal that Russia employs for this purpose.

For Moscow's goals further abroad, the Black Sea region serves as a geographic base for Russian activities in the Middle East and the waters of southwestern Eurasia. These include the permanent military presence that Russia's Black Sea Fleet has established in the last few years near the critically important waterway that connects the European waters to the Indian Ocean basin.

Russia's Strategic Disposition on the Black Sea

Russian geopolitical position in the Black Sea region consists of the following territorial assets: Krasnodar Krai, Rostov Oblast and the Republic of Adygea of the Russian Federation; occupied Crimea and the de facto Russian-held part of Donbas in Ukraine; occupied Abkhazia in Georgia; and the de facto Russian-held Transnistria in Moldova. Russian control of Crimea is a defining feature of the Russian strategic position in the region. The occupied peninsula contains the city of Sevastopol - Russia's main naval base in the whole southwestern Eurasia hosting most of the Black Sea Fleet's ships as well as numerous other military units. Crimea is also the main geographic platform for Russia's anti-access/area denial forces in the region with its landmass stretching deep towards the center of the Black Sea, thus providing the Russians with a better reach for their land-based anti-ship and anti-aircraft assets as well as their radar and electronic warfare systems.

Military capability plays an immense role in modern Russia's foreign strategy. Sometimes the Russians actually use it but even when they do not, their implied ability to do so is a crucial

instrument in itself. This certainly concerns the main targets of Russian geostrategy in the Black Sea region – Ukraine and Georgia, both of which Russia under its present regime has attacked militarily. In the Middle East, too, the active diplomacy in which Russia has engaged over the last several years is heavily dependent on Russia’s military capabilities in that region which, in turn, rely a great deal on the strength of the Russian military position on the Black Sea.

The headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet are located in Sevastopol.¹ The city’s crucial naval base hosts the following vessels: *Slava* / Project 1164 *Atlant* class guided missile cruiser ***Moskva***; *Admiral Grigorovich* / Project 11356P/M class frigates ***Admiral Grigorovich***, ***Admiral Essen*** and ***Admiral Makarov***, *Krivak II* / Project 1135M *Burevestnik* M class frigate ***Pytlivy*** and *Krivak I* / Project 1135 *Burevestnik* class frigate ***Ladny***; *Buyan-M* / Project 21631 class corvettes ***Grayvoron***, ***Ingushetia***, ***Orekhovo-Zuyevo*** and ***Vyshny Volochyok***, *Bora* / *Dergach* / Project 1239 class corvettes ***Bora*** and ***Samum***, and *Tarantul* class corvettes ***R-60 Burya***, ***R-109 Briz***, ***R-334 Ivanovets***, ***R-239 Naberezhnye Chelny*** and ***R-71 Shuya***; *Grisha III* / Project 1124M class anti-submarine corvettes ***Muromets*** and ***Suzdalets*** and *Grisha I* / Project 1124 class ***Aleksandrovets***. Sevastopol also hosts six minesweepers, two of which - ***Ivan Antonov*** and ***Vladimir Yemelyanov*** – belong to the new *Alexandrit* / Project 12700 class, and six intelligence collection ships, including ***Ivan Khurs*** of the new *Yury Ivanov* / Project 18280 class. Three amphibious transport docks and four other landing ships are also based in Sevastopol.

The land-based anti-ship capabilities in Sevastopol are provided by the **15th Coastal Missile Artillery Brigade** with its Bastion-P and Bal mobile coastal defense missile systems and Utyos stationary coastal defense missile system.² The **810th Naval Infantry Brigade** is also based in Sevastopol, along with a variety of Special Forces units that include the **388th Maritime Reconnaissance Point** (a naval Special Forces battalion), the **102nd Special Purpose Detachment** and, reportedly,³ the maritime branch of the Russian Special Operations Forces’ “Senezh” center.

Most of the other land forces in Crimea belong to the Black Sea Fleet’s **22nd Army Corps**, headquartered in Simferopol. The corps’ main units are the **126th Coastal Defense Brigade**, the **8th Artillery Regiment** (both located near Simferopol), the **127th Reconnaissance Brigade** and the **1096th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment** (both in Sevastopol). The **171st Separate Air Assault Battalion** that belongs to the 7th Air Assault (Mountain) Division of the Russian Airborne Troops

¹ The research on the Russian military units and bases used herein has been done for the Rondeli Foundation’s interactive map of the Russian armed forces which provides a visual guide to the Russian military structure. See: David Batashvili, *Russian Military Forces: Interactive Map*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org/maps/view/russian-military-forces>

² “В Крыму восстановлена боеготовность шахтного берегового ракетного комплекса “Утес”,” *Интерфакс*, 18 ноября 2016, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/537618>

³ Силы специальных операций, Вооружённые силы России, milkavkaz.com, <http://www.milkavkaz.com/index.php/voorujonnie-cili-racii/cc0>

is based either in Feodosia or in the north of the peninsula, in the town of Dzhankoi, according to differing Russian sources.⁴

The main air defense force in Crimea is the **31st Air Defense Division** (HQ in Sevastopol), containing two regiments armed with S-400 surface-to-air missile systems. The **12th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment** has two S-400 battalions in the west of Crimea – in Sevastopol and Yevpatoria. The **18th Anti-Aircraft Regiment** has two S-400 battalions in the east and the northeast of the peninsula – in Feodosia and Dzhankoi.

Crimea hosts a network of air bases with a variety of fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft, including fighter, attack, reconnaissance and anti-submarine aircraft. The naval aviation of the Black Sea Fleet has the **318th Composite Aviation Regiment** at the Kacha air base and the **43rd Maritime Attack Aviation Regiment** at the Saki air base. Other Russian air units on the peninsula belong to the 4th Air and Air Defense Forces Army's **27th Composite Aviation Division** (HQ in Belbek, near Sevastopol) which consists of the **38th Fighter Regiment** (Belbek air base), the **37th Composite Aviation Regiment** (Gvardeyskoye air base) and the **39th Helicopter Regiment** (Dzhankoi helicopter base). The Russians also have a maritime flight test center in the east of Crimea, at the Kirovskoye air base.

Across the Kerch Strait to the east of Crimea, Krasnodar Krai which, unlike Crimea, legally belongs to the Russian Federation, hosts the smaller part of the Black Sea Fleet's forces. There, the Novorossiysk naval base contains the following naval assets: six *Improved Kilo / Project 636.3* class diesel submarines - *Kolpino*, *Krasnodar*, *Novorossiysk*, *Rostov-na-Donu*, *Stary Oskol* and *Velikiy Novgorod*⁵ (some Russian reports claim that these submarines are actually stationed at Sevastopol);⁶ *Grisha III/ Project 1124M* class anti-submarine corvettes *Kasimov*, *Povorino* and *Yeysk*; *Project 22160* class large patrol ships *Dmitry Rogachev*, *Pavel Derzhavin* and *Vasily Bykov*; and seven minesweepers. The naval base also hosts the **136th Special Purpose Detachment**.

Northwest from Novorossiysk in Utash, Krasnodar Krai, the Black Sea Fleet has the **11th Coastal Missile Artillery Brigade**, armed with Bastion-P and Bal mobile coastal defense missile systems and Bereg self-propelled coastal artillery guns. Additionally, while most of the 810th Naval

⁴ "В Феодосии сформирован отдельный десантно-штурмовой батальон," Правительство Республики Крым [website of the Russian occupation administration of Crimea], 02.12.2017,

<https://feo.rk.gov.ru/ru/article/show/2146>; "Крымский бастион: как изменилась военная инфраструктура полуострова," bmpd.livejournal.com, March 15th, 2019, <https://bmpd.livejournal.com/3569899.html>

⁵ Another submarine which was stationed at Sevastopol – *Alrosa* of the *Kilo / Project 877V* class – had been set for transfer to the Baltic Fleet. Its status was unclear at the time of writing.

⁶ "Крымский бастион: как изменилась военная инфраструктура полуострова," bmpd.livejournal.com, March 15, 2019, <https://bmpd.livejournal.com/3569899.html>

Infantry Brigade is stationed in Sevastopol, **one of its naval infantry battalions** is based in Temryuk, Krasnodar Krai.

In addition to the naval base, Novorossiysk also hosts the headquarters of the **7th Air Assault (Mountain) Division** as well as its **108th Air Assault Regiment**, **162nd Separate Reconnaissance Battalion** and a **separate tank battalion**. The division's **1141st Artillery Regiment** is based in Anapa, Krasnodar Krai. To the east of Novorossiysk, the village of Molkino hosts the **1st Missile Brigade** of the 49th Army, armed with Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile systems, and the **10th Special Forces Brigade**. The **227th Artillery Brigade** of the 49th Army is based in Krasnooktyabrskiy, Republic of Adygea.

Another major concentration of Russian land forces is around Rostov-on-Don, close to the part of Ukraine's Donbas region under the nominal control of Moscow's proxies and apparently standing ready to invade that region in the case of a major military escalation there. It includes the recently established **8th Army** and its main fighting force – the **150th Mechanized Division** with at least two mechanized, two armored and one artillery regiments in addition to other forces. This geographically concentrated grouping of Russian forces also includes the **22nd Special Forces Brigade**.

In Donbas itself, Russia's hybrid forces that inhabit the frontline across the Ukrainian troops are divided into the **1st Army Corps** (HQ in Donetsk) and the **2nd Army Corps** (HQ in Luhansk). Other foreign territories in the Black Sea region under the illegal Russian control also contain permanently based Russian troops. The **7th Military Base**, which structurally is a mechanized brigade, is stationed in occupied Abkhazia, Georgia. Moldova's region of Transnistria hosts an '**operational group**' of about 1,500 Russian troops.

It is notable that the vast majority of Russian air defense forces in southern Russia and the Caucasus are located on the eastern seaboard of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov or close to it. This includes all S-400 and S-300 units in this area with the exception of an S-300 regiment in Armenia. The **51st Air Defense Division** (HQ in Rostov-on-Don) includes the **1536th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment** (Rostov-on-Don) and the **1537th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment** (Novorossiysk), both of which are armed with the S-400 systems. The 51st Division also includes the **1721st Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment** (Sochi, Krasnodar Krai) which was armed with Buk-M1 systems according to the information available to the author at the time of writing. Korenovsk, Krasnodar Krai, hosts the **77th Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade** under the Southern Military District command armed with S-300V4 systems. Russian **occupation forces in**

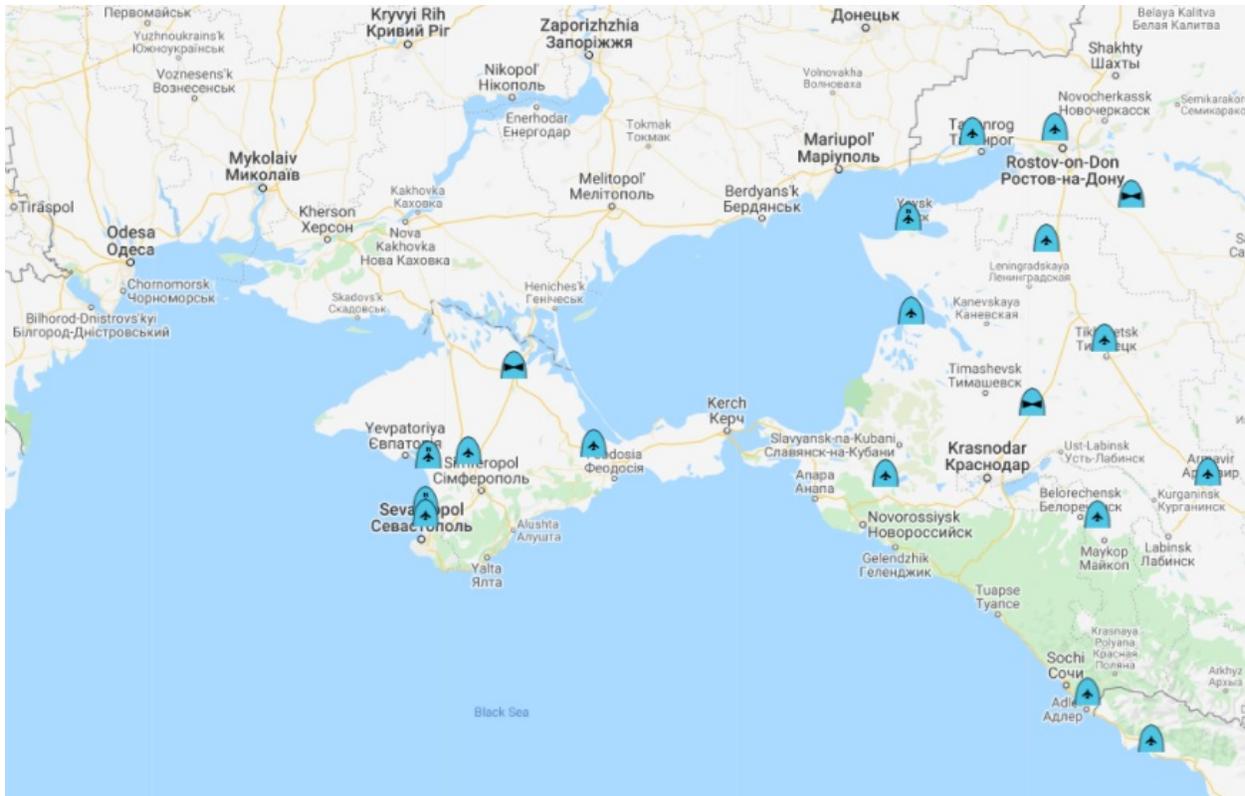
Abkhazia, Georgia include S-300PM systems while the Russian Ministry of Defense has published information indicating that S-400 systems might also be stationed in Abkhazia.⁷

Non-S-400/300 major air defense units in the Black Sea region include: the **90th Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade** (Afipsky, Krasnodar Krai) of the 49th Army and the **3rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment** (Novorossiysk) of the 7th Air Assault (Mountain) Division. The 150th Mechanized Division's **933rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment** (Millerovo, Rostov Oblast) is geographically oriented towards the inland part of Donbas rather than the Black Sea. There is also supposed to be an anti-aircraft missile brigade directly under the 8th Army command, somewhere in Rostov Oblast, but information regarding this unit was very limited at the time of writing, with its status unclear.

Krasnodar Krai and Rostov Oblast host one of the densest networks of military air bases in the Russian Federation. Units of the 4th Air and Air Defense Forces Army in this area include: the **16th Army Aviation Brigade** (Zernograd helicopter base, Rostov Oblast), the **3rd Fighter Regiment** (Krymsk air base, Krasnodar Krai), the **55th Separate Helicopter Regiment** (Korenovsk helicopter base, Krasnodar Krai), the **960th Attack Aviation Regiment** (Primorsko-Akhtarsk air base, Krasnodar Krai), the **559th Bomber Regiment** (Morozovsk air base, Rostov Oblast), the **31st Fighter Regiment** (Millerovo air base, Rostov Oblast), the **30th Separate Transport Mixed Aviation Regiment** (Tsentralny air base, Rostov Oblast) and the **Sochi air base** in Krasnodar Krai.

The Yeysk air base in Krasnodar Krai hosts the **859th Centre for Combat Application and Training of the Naval Aviation Air Crews** which belongs to the naval aviation of the Russian Navy's central command. The **708th Military Transport Aviation Regiment** of the Military Transport Aviation Command is stationed at the Taganrog air base in Rostov Oblast. In addition, four training air bases are located in Krasnodar Krai and Adygea - in **Armavir, Khanskaya, Kushchyovskaya** and **Tikhoretsk**. The Russians also operate the **Bombora air base** in occupied Abkhazia, Georgia.

⁷ "Зенитчики ЮВО из Абхазии выполнили пуски ракет из ЗРК С-400 «Триумф» на учении в Астраханской области," Министерство обороны Российской Федерации, 06.09.2019, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12251087@egNews; "Зенитчики российской военной базы в Абхазии выполнили пуски ракет ЗРК С-400 «Триумф» на полигоне в Астраханской области," Министерство обороны Российской Федерации, 16.09.2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12314497@egNews



Russian air bases near the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov

Russia's Activities on the Black Sea

The importance of the Black Sea for Russia's geostrategic goals that concern its immediate neighborhood is twofold: Moscow seeks to constrain NATO's activities on the Black Sea and wishes to be able to use the sea for applying pressure on Georgia and Ukraine whenever it deems it desirable.

The Russians have not been shy in showing their displeasure about NATO activities on the Black Sea. Russian diplomacy accuses NATO of an "active militarization of the Black Sea region"⁸ with the Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, speaking of an "unprecedented growth of the military potential, infrastructure and troops of NATO on the borders of the Russian Federation and a major increase in the number of various exercises both on the Baltic and the Black Seas as well

⁸ "Комментарий Департамента информации и печати МИД России в связи с заявлением Высокого представителя ЕС по иностранным делам и политике безопасности от имени Евросоюза и заявлением Североатлантического совета по Крыму и Севастополю," Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 18.03.19, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/kommentarii_predstavitelya/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQMdqBY/content/id/3575799

as in the air.”⁹The official Russian rhetoric claims that NATO, which has “come with not the kindest of intentions,” “undermines regional stability” by “widening the area of its activity in the waters of the Black Sea” and by the increased number of the NATO member state military ship visits and aircraft flights.¹⁰ Moscow also directs its displeasure at the Black Sea region NATO members, Bulgaria and Romania, which support the NATO military activities in the area.¹¹

According to the Russians, NATO’s naval exercises on the Black Sea which “are growing in scale” and have a “clearly aggressive” legend,¹² “threaten peace and stability,” since they are held “at the very borders of Russia.”¹³ In the opinion of Russian diplomats, the exercises with NATO’s participation “in Ukraine, Georgia and the Black Sea” are “explicitly provocative”¹⁴ and constitute an attempt to “provoke tensions” in the Black Sea region.¹⁵ The naval partnership between the United States and Ukraine, in particular, causes Moscow’s ire with promises that Russia “will be forced to react accordingly.”¹⁶

⁹ “Выступление и ответы на вопросы СМИ Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова в ходе совместной пресс-конференции по итогам переговоров с Министром иностранных дел Финляндской Республики Т.Сойни, Москва, 12 февраля 2019 года,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 12.02.19, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3513560

¹⁰ “Брифинг официального представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой, Москва, 3 декабря 2020 года,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 3.12.20, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4465803

¹¹ For instance, threatening Romania with “serious consequences” for its support to the US and NATO military presence on the Black Sea. See: “Интервью директора Четвертого Европейского департамента МИД России Ю.В.Пилипсона международному информационному агентству «Россия сегодня», 23 июля 2020 года,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 23.07.20, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/nota-bene/-/asset_publisher/dx7DsH1WAM6w/content/id/4252188

¹² “Выступление и ответы на вопросы СМИ Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова в ходе совместной пресс-конференции по итогам переговоров с Министром иностранных дел Государства Эритрея О.Салехом, Сочи, 31 августа 2018 года,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 31.08.18, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3334517

¹³ “Брифинг официального представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой, Москва, 18 февраля 2021 года,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 18.02.21, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4580881

¹⁴ “Интервью Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова «РТ Франс», «Пари Матч» и «Фигаро»,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 18.10.18, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/fr/-/asset_publisher/g8RuzDvY7qyV/content/id/3377331

¹⁵ “Брифинг официального представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой, Москва, 12 июля 2018 года,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 12.07.18, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/organizacia-po-zapreseniu-himiceskogo-oruzia/-/asset_publisher/km9HkaXMTium/content/id/3293994

¹⁶ “Интервью статс-секретаря – заместителя Министра иностранных дел России Г.Б.Карасина информационному агентству «РИА Новости», опубликованное 19 декабря 2018 года,” Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 20.12.18, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/ua/-/asset_publisher/ktnOZLTvbbS3/content/id/3452106

Russian officials characterize NATO's present stance on the Black Sea as a "containment policy" designed against Russia¹⁷ and accuse the United States of seeking to turn Romania, in particular, into "a key outpost for the power projection in the Black Sea region."¹⁸ NATO, in Moscow's view, "has long been seeking to turn the Black Sea into a zone of its exclusive influence."¹⁹ The European Union also has not been spared with Lavrov saying that EU officials "think that the Black Sea is their fiefdom" and "have long been claiming that both the Black Sea and the so-called 'Three Seas' (the Black, Baltic, Adriatic Seas) – all are the zone where the EU 'orders the music.'"²⁰

This official diplomatic stance of Russia has been reflected in its actual military policy. Over the last few years, the Russians have been working to increase their ability to threaten NATO forces on the Black Sea.

One element of this Russian policy has been the considerable strengthening of the naval force on the Black Sea that has occurred since the occupation of Crimea in February 2014. During this period, the Black Sea Fleet, which had largely been obsolete, received many new vessels. *Improved Kilo / Project 636.3* class diesel submarines **Kolpino**, **Krasnodar**, **Novorossiysk**, **Rostov-na-Donu**, **Stary Oskol** and **Velikiy Novgorod** joined Russian navy and the Black Sea Fleet in 2014-2016. *Admiral Grigorovich / Project 11356P/M* class frigates **Admiral Grigorovich**, **Admiral Essen** and **Admiral Makarov** – in 2016-2017. Three *Buyan-M / Project 21631* class corvettes - **Ingushetia**, **Orekhovo-Zuyevo** and **Vyshny Volochyok** joined the Fleet in 2018-2019 with the fourth, **Grayvoron**, doing so on 30 January 2021.²¹ Modern corvette-sized vessels currently described as large patrol ships, the *Project 22160* class **Dmitry Rogachev**, **Pavel Derzhavin** and **Vasily Bykov**, were commissioned in 2018-2020. *Yury Ivanov / Project*

¹⁷ "В МИД России заявили, что регион Черного моря должен остаться зоной мира," ТАСС, 30 Янв 2021, <https://tass.ru/politika/10584413>

¹⁸ "Брифинг официального представителя МИД России М.В.Захаровой, Москва, 13 августа 2020 года," Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 13.08.20, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4284195

¹⁹ "Интервью заместителя Министра иностранных дел России А.В.Грушко информагентству ТАСС, 28 июня 2018 года," Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 28.06.18,

https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3280228

²⁰ "Ответы на вопросы СМИ Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова «на полях» совместного заседания коллегий МИД России и МИД Белоруссии, Минск, 21 ноября 2018 года," Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 21.11.18,

https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3414293

²¹ David Batashvili, *Rondeli Russian Military Digest: Issue 72, 25 January - 31 January 2021*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org/publications/view/2923>

18280 class intelligence collection ship *Ivan Khurs* joined in 2018 and *Alexandrit / Project 12700* class minesweepers *Ivan Antonov*²² and *Vladimir Yemelyanov* did so in 2019.²³

The transfer of air force assets from the Russian Federation to Crimea was launched soon after the peninsula's occupation. As things stood in early 2021, Russia had completed the bulk of its supplies of combat aircraft to units in the Black Sea region back in 2016. Nevertheless, the structural development of local air units has continued. As of 2019, the Russians were in the process of establishing an air division in Crimea under the Black Sea Fleet's naval aviation. The division was set to include the 43rd Maritime Attack Aviation Regiment (Saki air base) and the 318th Composite Aviation Regiment (Kacha air base).²⁴ Deliveries of equipment have continued as well. For instance in March 2020, the Russian naval aviation's only two Ka-31R airborne early warning and control helicopters, which had previously served with the Northern Fleet, were transferred to the 318th Composite Aviation Regiment.²⁵ In the spring of 2019, a squadron of Forpost type reconnaissance UAVs was created within this same regiment.²⁶

Due to the realities of the physical and the political geography, ships and aircraft are primary assets that the United States and its allies could employ to involve themselves in a potential military crisis in the Black Sea region. It is notable, therefore, that the Russians made sure to station serious land-based anti-ship and anti-aircraft assets in the strategically located Crimea. Shortly after the occupation of the peninsula in 2014,²⁷ the Russians established the 15th Coastal Missile Artillery Brigade in Sevastopol. The Brigade has both Bastion-P and Bal anti-ship

²² David Batashvili, *Russian Military Transformation Tracker: Issue 1, August 2018-July 2019*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/russian-monitor/view/2713>; David Batashvili, *Rondeli Russian Military Digest: Issue 5, 2 September-8 September 2019*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org//publications/view/2722>

²³ Information on new ships joining the Russian navy is available in a variety of public sources. One useful database is: *Black Sea Fleet: Complete Ship List*, Kchf.ru, <https://www.kchf.ru/eng/ship/>

²⁴ Алексей Козаченко Алексей Рамм Богдан Степовой Роман Крецул Евгений Дмитриев, "НАТО так надо: новые авиадивизии закроют небо над Балтикой и Крымом," *Известия*, 30 октября 2019, <https://iz.ru/905530/aleksei-kozachenko-aleksei-ramm-bogdan-stepovoi-roman-kretcul/nato-tak-nado-novye-aviadivizii-zakroiut-nebo-nad-baltikoi-i-krymom>

²⁵ David Batashvili, *Russian Military Transformation Tracker, Issue 2: 1 August 2019-15 December 2020*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org/russian-monitor/view/2902>

²⁶ David Batashvili, *Rondeli Russian Military Digest: Issue 2, 12 August-18 August 2019*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org//publications/view/2718>

²⁷ *Отдельная береговая ракетная бригада ЧФ*, Kchf.ru, https://www.kchf.ru/contract/sluzhba_bereg_art_brigada.htm

missile systems. It also includes a Soviet-era stationary anti-ship missile system Utyos²⁸ which the Russians had restored as of 2016.²⁹

In 2017-2018, the Russians established four battalions of S-400 surface-to-air missile systems in four different corners of the Crimean peninsula. The battalions are divided between two regiments of the 31st Air Defense Division (which was created in 2014 after the occupation³⁰), and are located in Sevastopol, Yevpatoria, Feodosia and Dzhankoi.³¹ By the end of 2018, the Russians had also established four battalions of Pantsir-S1 medium-range air defense systems in Crimea.³² In the Black Sea region besides Crimea, the 1536th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment in Rostov-on-Don was armed with S-400 systems instead of the S-300PM in 2019.³³

The Russians have also been building up their land forces in Crimea. By late 2014, they had established there the 126th Coastal Defense Brigade,³⁴ the 8th Artillery Regiment,³⁵ the 127th Reconnaissance Brigade and the 388th Maritime Reconnaissance Point.³⁶ On 1 December 2016, they created the 22nd Army Corps headquarters to command most of their land forces on the peninsula.³⁷ In December 2017, the 171st Separate Air Assault Battalion was also established in Crimea.³⁸ Russian reports suggest that the battalion is to be expanded into the 97th Air Assault Regiment.

²⁸ "Russia Black Sea Fleet 4K44 Utyos Coastal Missile Crew Fires Live Weapon on Practice Target," *Navy Recognition*, 28 April 2017, <http://navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/2017/april-2017-navy-naval-forces-defense-industry-technology-maritime-security-global-news/5157-russia-black-sea-fleet-4k44-utyos-coastal-missile-crew-fires-live-weapon-on-practice-target.html>

²⁹ "В Крыму восстановлена боеготовность шахтного берегового ракетного комплекса "Утес"," *Интерфакс*, 18 ноября 2016, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/537618>

³⁰ Марина Степанова, "Противовоздушная дивизия ПВО армии ВВС и ПВО Южного военного округа отмечает день своего образования," ИКС, 03 Дек 2018, <https://ikstv.ru/novosti/protivovozdushnaya-diviziya-pvo-armii-vvs-i-pvo-yuzhnogo-voennogo-okruga-otmechaet-den-svoego-obrazovaniya-03-12-2018/>

³¹ David Batashvili, *Russian Military Transformation Tracker: Issue 1, August 2018-July 2019*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org/russian-monitor/view/2713>

³² Ibid.

³³ David Batashvili, *Russian Military Transformation Tracker, Issue 2: 1 August 2019-15 December 2020*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org/russian-monitor/view/2902>

³⁴ "Первый заместитель Министра обороны Руслан Цаликов проверил обустройство 126-й отдельной бригады береговой обороны Черноморского флота," Министерство обороны Российской Федерации, 06.07.2017, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12132341@egNews

³⁵ "В Крыму сформирован 8-й отдельный артиллерийский полк," *Военный информатор*, 24.11.2014, <https://military-informant.com/news/v-krymu-sformirovan-8-j-otdelnyj-artillerijskij-polk.html>

³⁶ Константин Колонтаев, *История сил специального назначения Черноморского флота*, Раздел IV, Глава 4. Силы специального назначения Черноморского флота в 2009–2015 годах, <https://arsenal-info.ru/b/book/1881647449/49>

³⁷ "Состав созданных на флотах армейских корпусов," *Военное обозрение*, 25 мая 2017, <https://topwar.ru/116427-sostav-sozdannyh-na-flotah-armeyskih-korpusov.html>

³⁸ "В Феодосии сформирован отдельный десантно-штурмовой батальон," Правительство Республики Крым [website of the Russian occupation administration of Crimea], 02.12.2017, <https://feo.rk.gov.ru/ru/article/show/2146>

In broad strategic terms, Russian-occupied Crimea bears certain resemblance to Kaliningrad Oblast. Both are geopolitical outposts situated on mostly enclosed seas – the Black and the Baltic – in a way that gives them a great military significance. The seas in question and the countries on their shores are targeted by the activist Russian foreign strategy. When containing certain kinds of military assets, both of these outposts can seriously hinder the military activities of Russia’s adversaries on each of these seas. If there is another crisis caused by Russian actions towards Ukraine or Georgia, or any of the countries on the Baltic Sea, these outposts can play a critical role.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the composition of the Russian forces in these two provinces is somewhat similar. Both have major naval bases with numerous Russian warships, air bases and units undergoing structural optimization, anti-ship units with Bastion-P and Bal systems, and recently placed S-400 air defense systems, with considerable and still growing land forces around all of these assets.

The Russians are constantly trying to give NATO the message that the Black Sea is their strategic and military turf. Whenever a naval ship from a NATO country comes to the Black Sea for a visit, the Russian media publishes news from the Ministry of Defense saying that the Black Sea Fleet has “started tracking the activities” of such a ship or ships.³⁹ This practice is applied apparently without exception. On occasion, Russian aircraft try to harass NATO ships operating on the Black Sea by low passes and attack runs.⁴⁰

The Russian air force and the media behave in a similar manner towards the NATO military aircraft flying over the neutral waters of the Black Sea. Russian planes systematically follow Western ones, with the Russian media habitually reporting these “intercepts” in the same standard style. Such incidents have become a particularly frequent occurrence since late May 2020. As of the time of writing in late February 2021, they have been occurring almost every month. The peak during this period was in August and September 2020. The Russians reported “intercepts” in 12 days of August and nine days of September. Usually, the NATO planes involved are from the United States but there have been a number of such incidents with British and French aircraft as well. The Russian fighters intercepting NATO planes are Su-27s in

³⁹See some examples: “Черноморский флот следит за судами ВМС Великобритании и США, зашедшими в Черное море,” *ТАСС*, 16 сен 2020, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/9476945>; “Черноморский флот приступил к слежению за эсминцем ВМС США «Дональд Кук»,” *Известия*, 23 ноября 2020, <https://iz.ru/1091108/2020-11-23/chernomorskii-flot-pristupil-k-slezheniiu-za-esmintcem-vms-ssha-donald-kuk>; Александр Степанов, “Черноморский флот следит за кораблями ВМС Испании и Греции,” *Российская газета*, 25.02.2021, <https://rg.ru/2021/02/25/chernomorskij-flot-sledit-za-korablami-vms-ispanii-i-grecii.html>

⁴⁰ The practice became a frequent feature after the occupation of Crimea and has remained so since. For examples, see: US Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet, Twitter account, January 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/USNavyEurope/status/1355968356000657408>; David Cenciotti, “Russia’s Newest Su-30 Multirole Jets and Su-24 Bombers Practiced Attack Runs on NATO Warships in the Black Sea,” *The Aviationist*, March 4, 2015, <https://theaviationist.com/2015/03/04/su-30-and-su-24-over-nato-ships/>

most cases and Su-30s occasionally.⁴¹ Intercepts of Russian aircraft by NATO planes over the Black Sea are reported much less frequently. Instances of such reports occurred in May, July and September 2020. The NATO jets reportedly intercepting Russian planes belonged to Romania, Turkey, Bulgaria and Canada (which had deployed its fighters to Romania).⁴²

The Russian pressure on NATO's naval and air assets on the Black Sea is both systematic and demonstrative, with the Russian Defense Ministry and media making sure to render the incidents public. The Russian behavior, through both military and informational assets, is likely designed to send NATO the message that its military presence on the Black Sea will never be easy and in the case of a potential future crisis in the region it will not be safe, either. Vladimir Putin personally engaged in the symbolic messaging in January 2020 when he attended a major naval exercise on the Black Sea on board a guided missile cruiser, *Marshal Ustinov*, which had come from the North Fleet to participate in the exercise along the local warships.⁴³

A major factor in terms of the Western naval access to the Black Sea is Turkey. This was demonstrated in the period immediately after the Russo-Georgian War of 7-12 August 2008 when Turkey hindered the passage of some of the US ships to the Black Sea that were to support Georgia in the face of the Russian aggression. At the same time, Turkey is an independent geostrategic player with complicated relationships involving partnerships as well as antagonism with both the West and Russia. This means that in the case of a future crisis on the Black Sea, the exact nature of Turkey's behavior could be an unknown for Moscow as well as for the West. In preparation for a crisis scenario, Russia, therefore, has to rely only on its own assets - despite the tensions that exist between the West and Turkey.

Besides constraining NATO presence, an important purpose of the Russian military power in the Black Sea region is to have the ability to apply maritime pressure on the region's countries that have been targets of Russia's hostile geostrategic activities, in particular, Georgia and Ukraine.

A notorious case in this sense was the naval blockade of Georgia by the Russian navy during the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. In the last several years, the Russians have shown that they can use maritime pressure not only in the midst of a military crisis but also as a prolonged series of activities during nominal peace. This time, the target has been Ukraine with "the constant

⁴¹ Information regarding intercepts over the Black Sea in the indicated time period can be found in the issues of the *Rondeli Russian Military Digest* at <https://www.gfsis.org/publications/military-digest>

⁴² David Batashvili, *Rondeli Russian Military Digest: Issue 40, 18 May - 24 May 2020*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org/publications/view/2806>; David Batashvili, *Rondeli Russian Military Digest: Issue 46, 20 July - 26 July 2020*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org/publications/view/2827>; David Batashvili, *Rondeli Russian Military Digest: Issue 55, 21 September - 27 September 2020*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org/publications/view/2861>

⁴³ David Batashvili, *Rondeli Russian Military Digest: Issue 21, 6 January - 12 January 2020*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org/publications/view/2751>

closing of the sea for exercises, the checking of commercial ships coming into Ukrainian ports in the Ukrainian territorial waters of Azov, the demonstration of naval forces, the illegal capture of 24 Ukrainian navy crew members on November 25, 2018... just a few to name among the long list of Russian military and navy actions in the basin of the Azov Sea and the Black Sea.”⁴⁴ The capability to exercise maritime pressure against Ukraine and Georgia is a part of the wide-ranging arsenal that Russia employs in its efforts directed against the sovereignty of these two nations.



The two main Russian naval bases on the Black Sea, the Tartus base in Syria and the Port Sudan naval station gained by Russia in late 2020

Beyond the Black Sea

The Black Sea region and Russian military assets stationed there have a role in Moscow’s geostrategy beyond its immediate neighborhood. They are an important factor for Russia’s Middle Eastern policy as well as its naval strategy in the waters abutting the southwestern Eurasia. The Black Sea region functions in this regard as a geographic springboard better suited for the purpose than any other area under Moscow’s control.

⁴⁴ Hanna Shelest, “Ukraine,” in David Batashvili, Hanna Shelest, Dovilė Šukytė, Alexander Wielgos and Maciej Śmigiel, *Russia’s Geostrategic Activities in Eastern Europe*, 2020, p. 15, <https://www.gfsis.org/files/library/pdf/English-2851.pdf>

Among Russia's most important geostrategic activities in the last few years has been its military involvement in Syria where Moscow has worked hard to frustrate the objectives of the Western states. The Russian military presence in Syria is largely supplied by maritime shipping from the Black Sea. The large scale and systematic nature of this continuous supply operation has caused it to be referred to as Russia's "Syrian Express."⁴⁵

Moscow's foothold on the Syrian end of this strategic maritime route is the Tartus naval base. An agreement between Russia and the Assad regime, signed in 2017 to last for at least 49 years, confirmed Russian access to the base. The Russians soon followed up with the infrastructural development of the Tartus base to make it more suitable for the needs of the Russian navy.⁴⁶

In addition to guarding the "Syrian Express" logistical route, Russian warships rotating at the Tartus base have also directly engaged in Russian combat activities in Syria by conducting missile strikes.⁴⁷ Additionally, Russian ships periodically engage in joint military exercises with the Assad regime forces. Along with the Black Sea Fleet's vessels, troops from its Special Forces units – the aforementioned 388th Maritime Reconnaissance Point and the 102nd Special Purpose Detachment – have reportedly⁴⁸ also served at the Tartus naval base after the launch of Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015.

Aside from Syria, an interesting instance of Russia's employment of the Black Sea in its Middle East diplomacy occurred in November 2020 when the Russian Black Sea Fleet held a joint exercise with the Egyptian navy. For this purpose, Egypt's warships visited the Black Sea for the first time.⁴⁹ This Russian invitation for the Egyptian ships to come through the Turkish Straits to exercise in Turkey's maritime backyard occurred at a time when there were ongoing maritime tensions between Egypt and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean.

⁴⁵ For example, see: Jack Stubbs, Maria Tsvetkova, "Russia Builds Up Forces in Syria, Reuters Data Analysis Shows," *Reuters*, October 7, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-exclusive/exclusive-russia-builds-up-forces-in-syria-reuters-data-analysis-shows-idUSKCN1271YO>

⁴⁶ "В сирийском Тартусе начнёт работу судоремонтный комплекс ЧФ РФ," *Военное обозрение*, 8 августа 2019, <https://topwar.ru/161021-v-sirijskom-tartuse-nachnet-rabotu-sudoremontnyj-kompleks-chf-rf.html>; "Судоремонтная мастерская заработает в базе ВМФ РФ в Тартусе 15 октября," *TACC*, 26 сентября 2019, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/6934515>

⁴⁷ See reports on the matter in both official and unofficial sources: "Russian Navy Ships Conducted Strikes by Four Kalibr Cruise Missiles on Objects of ISIS Terrorist Grouping near Palmyra," Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, May 31, 2017, <https://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12126444@egNews>; David Batashvili, *Rondeli Russian Military Digest: Issue 62, 9 November - 15 November 2020*, Rondeli Foundation, <https://www.gfsis.org/publications/view/2884>

⁴⁸ Константин Колонтаев, *История сил специального назначения Черноморского флота*, Раздел IV, Глава 4. Силы специального назначения Черноморского флота в 2009–2015 годах, <https://arsenal-info.ru/b/book/1881647449/49>

⁴⁹ Ridvan Bari Urcosta, *Egyptian-Russian Naval Exercises in the Black Sea: Strategic Balancing against Turkey?*, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 18 Issue: 11, The Jamestown Foundation, January 21, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/egyptian-russian-naval-exercises-in-the-black-sea-strategic-balancing-against-turkey/>

From the naval strategic point of view, the Black Sea region is Russia's primary geographic base for operating in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean basin. Back in 2003, Vladimir Putin stated that "the Black Sea gives Russia a direct access to the crucially important global transportation routes."⁵⁰ Since 2013,⁵¹ Russia has had a permanent Mediterranean squadron which relies on the Tartus naval base and the route that connects that base to the Black Sea. While the squadron is occasionally visited by ships from Russia's other fleets, its core consists of the Black Sea Fleet's naval assets.

Russia's Mediterranean squadron operating from the Tartus base gives Moscow a permanent naval presence on the critical maritime route running through the Suez Canal that connects all European waters to the Indian Ocean basin. Russia further strengthened its presence on this route in 2020 by reaching an agreement with Khartoum to station up to four of its naval vessels at Port Sudan⁵² – in the middle of the western Red Sea coast. While no statement has been made at the time of writing regarding the composition of Russia's future naval presence at Port Sudan, its geographic location, as well as the existing practice with the Tartus base and the Russian Mediterranean squadron, appear to indicate that the Black Sea Fleet is likely to play a greater role in operating the naval station at Port Sudan than other fleets of the Russian navy.

Conclusion

The Black Sea region plays a role in Russia's pursuit of both of the main goals of its current ruling regime's foreign strategy.

Military strength in the Black Sea is important for Moscow's goal to dominate its neighbors – in this case, Ukraine and Georgia, particularly. This strength allows Russia to apply pressure on these nations through the maritime domain in addition to the other means it employs against them. Its other primary purpose is to contain NATO's military presence on the Black Sea. This also has direct implications for Russia's quest to dominate its neighbors because in the case of a new military crisis organized by Moscow and targeting either Georgia or Ukraine, its ability to deter the potential American and NATO actions in opposition to the Russian aggression in the

⁵⁰ „Вступительное слово на совещании по вопросам военно-дипломатического присутствия России в Черноморско-Азовском регионе,” Президент России, 17 сентября 2003, года <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22117>

⁵¹ “Три года назад было сформировано оперативное командование постоянного оперативного соединения ВМФ России в Средиземном море ,” Министерство обороны Российской Федерации, 22.09.2016, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12096837@egNews; “Владимир Путин посетил Центральный командный пункт Вооруженных Сил РФ ,” Министерство обороны Российской Федерации, 06.06.2013, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=11769044@egNews

⁵² “Россия решила создать в Судане базу для кораблей с ядерными установками,” *Медуза*, 11 ноября 2020, <https://meduza.io/news/2020/11/11/rossiya-reshila-sozdat-v-sudane-bazu-dlya-korabley-s-yadernymi-ustanovkami>; “Россия и Судан подписали соглашение о создании пункта ВМФ,” *Известия*, 8 декабря 2020, <https://iz.ru/1097346/2020-12-08/rossiya-i-sudan-podpisali-soglashenie-o-sozdanii-punkta-vmf>

Black Sea region could be of critical importance in determining the final outcome of such a crisis.

A strong position in the Black Sea region is also important for Russia's effort to damage the Western interests and increase its own influence in parts of the world beyond its immediate neighborhood. The Black Sea region functions as a strategic, and especially naval, springboard that helps Russian strategy in the Middle East, first and foremost in Syria. Moscow has also used it to establish a military position on a key strategic maritime route connecting the Mediterranean Sea and the rest of the European waters to the Indian Ocean basin.

In view of this importance of the Black Sea region in Russian foreign strategy, Moscow has been strengthening and modernizing its military forces there during the last several years, particularly since the occupation of Crimea in February 2014. It has also made a habit of applying systematic pressure on the NATO ships and aircraft operating in the neutral waters of the Black Sea and of doing so in a deliberately advertised public manner. At the same time, the Russians have relied on the Black Sea Fleet in their efforts to gain a strong position in the Suez Canal area by establishing a permanent Mediterranean squadron in 2013, followed in a few years by the infrastructural improvements of their Tartus naval base in Syria and, most recently, by gaining a new naval station at Port Sudan.

The current dynamic of Russian activities, as well as the evident permanence of the present Russian regime's foreign goals, suggest that the Black Sea region and Russia's military assets based in it will continue to play an important part in Moscow's geostrategy.