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- CRIMEAN PLATFORM
- TEMPORARY OCCUPATION
- INTERNATIONAL REACTION

Crimea

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THE BLACK SEA AND THE BALTIC SEA: TWO SEAS, ONE SECURITY CHALLENGE

Andrii Ryzhenko

Ukrainian Navy Captain (ret.)

The article examines the current stance and military balance between the Russian and NATO forces in the Baltic and the Black Sea regions, as well as Russian actions to undermine the security of the Black Sea region. The current capacity of the Russian forces in the occupied Crimea and the Kremlin's power projection are studied.

The current Russian maritime policy on the European continent is focused on resistance to and displacement of NATO forces from the Atlantic operational area. It is directed by the *Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Activities for the Period up to 2030* (dated 20 July 2017). This document considers “the desire of a number of states, primarily the United States of America (USA) and its allies, to dominate the World Ocean, including the Arctic, as well as to achieve the overwhelming superiority of their naval forces¹” as one of the greatest threats to the national security of the Russian Federation in the maritime domain. The Baltic and the Black seas are vitally important areas for Russia in all aspects of its national security. This has been proven during the last few centuries. Currently, the Russian naval forces in the Baltic and the Black seas are gaining significance as two military wrenches to project power toward the Atlantic, primarily against NATO and the alliance members.

Russian Naval Bastions in the Baltic and Black Seas

In both regions, Russia is rebuilding its maritime capabilities, which had been significantly decreased after collapse of the Soviet Union. Currently, in both areas, they concentrate military power within two “naval bastions”: Kaliningrad area in the Baltics and Crimea in the Black Sea. However, despite efforts, the Russian military potential there is still weaker than NATO's. It is the reason why they widely use hybrid technologies to gain geopolitical dominance while minimising costs and military engagement. The ultimate goals are to restore the status of Russia as a superpower and to keep steady the multidimensional influence within the territory of the former USSR.

Let us take a look at several influences of this strategic goal realisation by Russia in both areas.

1 Legal Portal of the Russian Federation
[<https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/71625734/>].

From geopolitical perspective, both areas have been “windows to Europe” for Russia since the times of Peter the Great (the Baltic Sea, 1703) and Catherine the Great (the Black Sea, 1774). It is important to keep these “windows” always open and under control. This is a guarantee for the growth of their economy and geopolitical impact, including in areas beyond the Russian Empire. After the collapse of the USSR, Russian control over the Black and Baltic seas seriously weakened: Access was limited and military power fall down.

The Soviet Black Sea fleet saw a significant drop, from 800 surface ships and 28 submarines to no more than a tenth of this number, consisting of aging ships. Five out of six cruisers were decommissioned. The 5th Soviet Navy squadron, which conducted maritime operations in the Mediterranean Sea (comprising up to 50 warships from the Black Sea and Northern Fleet), was dismantled in 1992². Russia lost a significant portion of the Black Sea coast. Much of the maritime infrastructure passed under the jurisdiction of independent Ukraine and Georgia. NATO nations (Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania) and the alliance’s partners Georgia and Ukraine control more than 90% of the Black Sea coastline.

In the 2010s, the Turkish Navy was double the size of the Russian Black Sea fleet: 120 against 60 combat ships. Each of the other Black Sea nations in addition had up to 20-30 combat units of the surface fleet, mostly built in the Soviet era. However, certain capabilities of these small navies could repel possible aggression from sea. For example, at the end of 2013, the Ukrainian Navy had the potential to launch up to 50 P-15M (Styx

or SS-N-2) anti-ship missiles from warships and coastal batteries.

Maritime economy of the Black Sea is mostly concentrated in cargo transportation of oil, raw materials, metal, and agriculture products among littoral states and outside via the Bosphorus Strait. The economic performance of the region during the 1990s was highly unstable, and even the countries that were spared from conflicts did not fare much better. However, in the 2000s, the region enjoyed a fairly rapid economic recovery accompanied by welcome structural changes, although the labour market situation and social conditions in general were difficult. Both the economic heterogeneity of the Black Sea and political issues are still critical factors behind the low level of regional integration. Russia’s growing economy has kept energy dependency of most its neighbours and prevented them from a deeper economic cooperation with the European Union. The outlook for the Black Sea countries is slightly positive, with annual growth of 3%-5% feasible in the medium and long run. More decisive steps toward regional and European economic integration would be beneficial. However, such integration will require significant changes in the stance of regional and European policymakers and the resolution of “frozen conflicts”³. Russia definitely does not want that to happen. They want to keep income from oil and gas exports to Europe and minimise direct cooperation of the Black Sea region neighbours with the European Union.

Crimea is also vital for Russia as a geopolitical projector of power beyond, to Northern Africa, with the aim to restore the

2 *Россия создает Средиземноморскую эскадру ВМФ РФ. Практически (Russia Is Creating a Mediterranean Navy Squad of RF in Practice)*, “Neftegaz”, 07 April 2013 [https://neftegaz.ru/news/politics/257998-rossiya-sozdaet-sredizemnomorskuyu-eskadru-vmf-rf-praktichieski/].

3 V. Astrov, P. Havlik, *Economic Developments in the Wider Black Sea Region*, WIIW Research Report No. 349, September 2008 [https://wiiw.ac.at/economic-developments-in-the-wider-black-sea-region-p-458.html].

old Soviet influence and minimise NATO Mediterranean Dialogue initiatives.

The collapse of the USSR caused the same sad story for Russian military capabilities in the Baltic Sea. The Soviet Baltic fleet was the largest in the region and had 232 warships, including 32 diesel submarines, around 400 combat aircraft and helicopters, and 16 coastal missile launchers.



Crimea is also vital for Russia as a geopolitical projector of power beyond, to Northern Africa, with the aim to restore the old Soviet influence and minimise NATO Mediterranean Dialogue initiatives

After 1991, Russian access to the Baltic Sea became much more limited. They lost naval bases in Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Germany and controlled only 7% of the Baltic coast, 500 km.

Change of the geopolitical picture in the Baltics continued in the 2000s: Six of its littoral states (out of nine) gained status of NATO members and eight became members of the European Union. The only country outside these organisations was the Russian Federation. During at least the last 10-12 years, it demonstrates growing political disputes with Western countries, especially NATO members. However, Moscow keeps very active in promoting their oil and raw materials, which bring Russia 36%-51% of the national budget. The port of St. Petersburg accounts for 52% of international container traffic

from Russia to the West. Trade with Russia accounts for up to 40% of the foreign trade of its Baltic neighbours, primarily Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. The economy of the region is probably better developed than the Black Sea region. About 125,000 vessels a year pass through the Danish Straits, which connect the Baltic Sea with the North Sea. The Danish Straits have the fifth largest oil pipeline in the world, with 3.3 billion barrels per day (more than through the Bosphorus, Panama, or Suez Canals). Most of these shipments are from the Russian port of Primorsk⁴.

Since the Russian economy started to show some positive tendencies and growth in the 2000s, they immediately invested in their defence. Nowadays, the Russian defence spending in absolute terms has reached the level of defence spending of the USSR in 1990. From USD 7 billion in 1998, the current Russian defence budget rose to about USD 70 billion. Thus, in 20 years, there has been a tenfold increase in defence spending. Half of the Russian defence budget goes to the development and purchase of new weapons, which has significantly modernised the armament of the Russian army. Expenditures per Russian military increased to USD 75,000 per year (from USD 16,000 in 1995).

The fact of steadily growing military spending allowed Russia to “build up muscles” and bring back their military power into two critical areas: the Black and the Baltic seas.

Currently, they are mostly concentrated in two “bastions”: the Kaliningrad district in the Baltics and Crimea in the Black Sea. The primary feature of both is the creation of an

4 М. Гончар, А. Риженко, Б. Устименко, *Підводний простір Балтики: російські можливості (Underwater Space of the Baltic: Russian Opportunities)*, Чорноморська безпека, №1, 2021 [https://geostrategy.org.ua/chornomorska-bezpeka/chornomorska-bezpeka-1-39-2021/zavantazhyty-zhurnal-chornomorska-bezpeka-1-39-2021].

“Anti-Access / Area Denial” (A2 / AD) zone with a full spectrum of situation awareness, air defence, and striking capabilities.

At least during the last five years, an intensification of Russian military exercises in the Baltic and Black seas has been observed. These exercises include live firing and simulation of massive missile strikes from coastal complexes, surface ships, aircraft, and helicopters against NATO forces and military facilities in the regions. This involves the coastal missile systems. Due to the deployment of the S-400, a tiered air defence system has been created, capable of detecting targets at a range of up to 600 km and destroying at a range of up to 240 km.



the Russian Crimean “bastion” changed the balance of power in the entire Black Sea region.

The number of new warships entering into service of the Black Sea fleet is 3.6 times more than in the Baltic Fleet and 4.5 times more than in the Northern Fleet

The backbone of the Russian Baltic Fleet has significantly increased with long-range strike capabilities of a new frigate project 11540, four new corvettes project 20380, two “Buyan” missile corvettes project 21630, and three “Karakurt” missile boats project 22800, which during the last 10 years have become part of the surface fleet. Each of these ships is a carrier of eight cruise missiles with a range up to 1,500 km, including a nuclear warhead. Several more

“Karakurt” missile boats are expected to arrive in the next few years.

Similar to the Baltics, the Russian Crimean “bastion” changed the balance of power in the entire Black Sea region. The number of new warships entering into service of the Black Sea fleet is 3.6 times more than in the Baltic Fleet and 4.5 times more than in the Northern Fleet. The total size of the surface fleet exceeded 50 warships and submarines. The tempo of the Black Sea Fleet development may allow doubling the missile salvo of “Kalibr” missiles, from 80 to 168 by 2027. In addition, over the last two years, Russia has been deploying warships from the Northern and Caspian seas to the Black Sea to increase its military potential in the region.

NATO’s Superiority at Sea

Meanwhile, despite efforts and investment in military potential, the Russian naval forces in both regions are still weaker than NATO. Both areas are operational areas for NATO’s permanent strike and mine task groups, engaging NATO warships from outside the regions.

For example, since January 2021, the NATO’s permanent strike task group 1 (SNMG1) consists of warships from Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway⁵; strike task group 2 (SNMG2) includes warships from Spain, Italy, Turkey, Greece, Germany; the NATO mine countermeasures task group 1 (SNMCMG1) has warships from the Belgium, Estonia, Germany, and the UK⁶.

These tasks groups periodically visit the Black and Baltic seas, conduct multinational

- 5 *SNMG1 Participates in the Norwegian Exercise TG 21-1*, NATO, 19 February 2021 [<https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2021/snmg1-participates-in-the-norwegian-exercise-tg-211>].
- 6 *Ukrainian Storm Warning: Grave Danger to Europe in Maritime Domain*, Center of Defense Strategies, November 2020, p. 33.

exercises (BALTOPS, Sea Breeze, Sea Shield, Agile Spirit) and run cross-training activity with NATO partner nations.

The only limitation for the Black Sea is that non-Black Sea NATO nations' warships can stay no more than 21 days on each single voyage (Montreux Convention, 1936).


Hybrid Warfare Is the New Method to Gain Dominance at Sea

Thus, Russia opts to engage using non-conventional (hybrid) methods to gain dominance and compete with NATO forces.

Russia continues to restrict the freedom of navigation from between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov assured by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982). The Kerch Bridge, which limited the dimensions of vessels passing the Kerch Strait, was built without Ukraine's consent. Also, they continue to detain vessels from different countries at the entrance and exit of the Kerch Strait on the way to or from the ports of Ukraine in the Sea of Azov: Berdyansk and Mariupol. The average delay time for vessels bound for Ukrainian ports is up to two days in each direction (this is much longer than the waiting time for vessels bound for Russian ports). It harms the maritime economy of Ukraine and its business partners.

Since 2017, numerous cases of GNSS (Global Navigation Satellite System) spoofing have been recorded in the Baltic Sea (first during the Russian exercise "Zapad" in 2017) and in the Black Sea. The Center for Advanced Defense Studies (C4ADS, United States) identified around 10,000 cases of spoofing

that have affected more than 1,300 vessels around Russia and occupied territories since 2016⁷. Spoofed signals are able to force GNSS receivers to lose their lock on authentic satellite signals and instead lock on the signals generated by a spoofing device. After that, the spoofing transmitter can relay a false position or timing information to the victim receiver. GNSS in general cover the following navigation systems: GPS (US), GLONASS (Russia), Galileo (European Union), BeiDou (China), QZSS (Japan), and NavIC (India)⁸.



Manipulating SOLAS-74, Russia declares areas of the sea, unreasonably large in size and for an unreasonable duration, to be prohibited for navigation, ostensibly for combat training and shooting

Signal generators capable of conducting spoofing attacks used to cost of tens of thousands of dollars and required expert knowledge to operate. But this all began to change over the past decade with the advent of cheap, commercially available, and portable "software defined radios" (SDR) and open-source code capable of transmitting spoofed GPS signals. The Russian Federation is a pioneer in the use of these techniques to further its strategic interests. In response to NATO's advantage in C4ISR capabilities, Russia has prioritised the development of a comprehensive suite of asymmetrical EW systems designed to deceive, degrade, and deny military and civilian GNSS receivers, without targeting a single GNSS satellite.

7 О. Бедраченко, *Російська електронна війна: як Росія дезорієнтує GPS-навігацію в Криму та в Чорному морі, дослідили американські експертки (Russian Electronic Warfare: US Experts Investigate How Russia Disorients GPS Navigation in Crimea and Black Sea)*, "VoA News", 22 April 2019 [<https://ukrainian.voanews.com/a/navigatsija-rosija-vijna/4886608.html>].

8 *Above Us Only Stars*, C4ADS [<https://www.c4reports.org/aboveusonlystars>].

These systems are now in use across Russia's western and southern military districts at the border with NATO (including the Black and Baltic seas) and have been forward-deployed at the occupied territories of Ukraine and in Syria. C4ADS identified GNSS spoofing activities in proximity to the Kerch Bridge on two occasions – on 15 September 2016 and 15 May 2018 during Putin visits to this area.

Also, on 25 November 2018, an impact on AIS system (deactivation of transmitters) was recorded by the Ukrainian Navy at the entry to the Kerch Strait. Within a few hours, AIS transmitters were deactivated and most of sea contacts in vicinity of the Kerch Strait simply disappeared from screens.

On the same day, the case of Inmarsat satellite radio re-routing was observed. A Ukrainian Navy gunboat during the activation of its aboard Inmarsat radio received a connecting satellite physically located over Gulf of Guinea in African coast. Obviously, no connection happened

Manipulating SOLAS-74, Russia declares areas of the sea, unreasonably large in size and for an unreasonable duration, to be prohibited for navigation, ostensibly for combat training and shooting. For example, in August 2019, they restricted navigation for this purpose in almost 25% of the Black Sea waters for three weeks, including international shipping routes between Ukraine, Georgia, Romania, Turkey, and Bulgaria. Merchant ships were forced to bypass large sea areas, where most of the declared activities were not carried out.

The same practice is also known in Baltic Sea, in particular close to the coast of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. All these “hybrid” methods make Russia more powerful

by weakening neighbouring countries, bringing about negative economic and social consequences for them.

Conclusion

Russia is actively restoring its military capability in the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. It uses the same or similar ways and means in both regions to reach the Kremlin's strategic goal of military domination in the two seas. Development of technologies allows Russia to also use non-military, non-lethal means that are nevertheless effective and dangerous for civilian life. A clear understanding of that may increase the Euro-Atlantic community's proactive activities to restore security in both regions. Crimea is of primary significance for Russia, which uses it to project its military forces to accomplish strategic tasks in the area of Moscow's national interests, mostly competing with the US and NATO in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Russia will keep the Crimean case in high priority on the national political and diplomatic agenda. International support can help Ukraine to restore its sovereignty.

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