

# Russia's Black Sea Strategy

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Vladimir Putin's coming to power can be safely considered a starting point for the buildup and implementation of Russia's revanchist strategy. Revision of the international order, where Russia found itself on the margins of international politics, is the main objective of President Putin and his entourage. After all, in a liberal and democratic world, building a prosperous state without boosting personal capital is a kind of a mission impossible" for the upper class of the so-called „homo soveticus". The key region for securing Russia's global positioning is, of course, Eastern Europe, where the main role is given to Ukraine. The civilizational choice of the Ukrainian nation in 2013-2014 has dealt a significant blow to the Kremlin's geopolitical positions. In order to keep Kyiv in its orbit of influence, Moscow responded with the annexation of Crimea and poorly disguised aggression in Donbas. Ukraine's intransigence and strong international support for the country provoke Russia toward a wider use of a whole range of tools of influence and coercion because Putin simply can't grasp the idea of failing to complete his political magnum opus. Therefore, we more attacks are to be expected. This time it's the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov that may become the major domain of confrontation.

The Black Sea region is of particular strategic interest to the Russian Federation. First, Russia's dominance in the Black Sea would the Kremlin strengthening its position in the Balkans, Middle East, and North Africa. Given Russia's incursions in Syrian and Libyan civil wars, as well as its strong position in Serbia, it is paramount for Russian revisionism to be able to influence the security situation in the Mediterranean. Secondly, expanding the geography of influence in the Black Sea would allow the Kremlin obtaining more resources, for the lagging Russian economy dependent on

hydrocarbons, which would be a nice bonus. And, thirdly, the Black and Azov seas are home to interweaving trade and energy flows. Russia's imposing of the agenda in the Black Sea region would lead to massive economic losses for other regional states if they refuse to politically obey Moscow.

The tasks of geopolitical expansion in the Black Sea region are entrusted to the Russian Navy, which has been pro-active in its training routine, often practicing operations that clearly go beyond defensive in nature. It should also be reminded that after Russia's large-scale military exercises, an act of aggression usually follows. For example: after the joint command-staff exercises Kavkaz-2008, which completed in the second half of July 2008, a five-day war between Russia and Georgia erupted in August. Following the „Center-2015” exercise (September 14-20, 2015), where the issues were worked out of setting up and deploying an air strike group in the context of fighting against ISIS and Taliban terrorists, as early as September 30, the Kremlin announced the launch of a military campaign in Syria. Therefore, the Kavkaz-2020 joint command-staff exercise, which is openly anti-Ukrainian in nature, deserves special attention.

In the context of Putin's Black Sea strategy, during these exercises, actions toward ensuring the blockade of the Ukrainian littoral areas may be worked out. There are more than enough prerequisites to this end as the Russian Navy fleet has already practiced in this regard. During last year's Sea Breeze joint exercise, Russia's Black Sea Fleet closed off five maritime zones, which created significant obstacles for civilian navigation, thereby causing economic damage to the seaport of Odesa. The Kremlin operates in a somewhat different way in the Sea of Azov. The completion by Russia of their Kerch Strait Bridge is yet another blatant encroachment on Ukraine's sovereignty, as well as a tactical move that impedes freedom of navigation. Since the launch of road traffic across the bridge, 144 vessels have been physically unable to check

at Ukrainian ports. Besides, Russian patrol ships regularly detain for inspection merchant vessels bound for Mariupol and Berdyansk. Such checks sometimes last dozens of hours. As a result of Russia's illegal actions, Ukraine has suffered multi-million losses, while the Kremlin is gradually turning Azov into its inland water area.

It is obvious that the implementation of Russia's Black Sea strategy would be impossible without a fully controlled Crimean peninsula. For six years already, the Kremlin has been turning Crimea from a tourist Mecca into a real military foothold, which can potentially be used against Ukraine. As of today, more than 30,000 Russian troops have been deployed on the peninsula. Russia's defense ministry, despite quarantine restrictions, has launched military draft among the Crimean men, deploying them to serve across mainland Russia. The Crimea occupation administration has been promoting army conscription among the local population, as well as service with law enforcement and the FSB, while simultaneously pushing forward alarmist agenda. In addition to mobilizing human resources, Russia has been amassing weapons in Crimea, including the Bal, Iskander, and Bastion missile systems, the S-300 and S-400, Pantsir-S1, and Buk-M2 anti-aircraft missile launchers, as well as installing air defense systems and deploying long-range strategic Tu-22M3 bombers, capable of reaching any location in Europe. Moreover, the Kremlin has generously funded the development of military infrastructure, including the deployment of nuclear delivery means. Turning the peninsula into a nuclear arms depot close to Europe is seen as a challenge to NATO and an attempt to „mark” its territory in the Black Sea. Such actions create another hotbed of permanent tension for Ukraine, making it clear that such a military asset is intended not just for defense purposes. This is especially important, given the freshwater supply issue in Crimea. Some 85% of all freshwater in the pre-occupation period used to be supplied from mainland Ukraine via the North Crimean Canal, which runs from Kherson region. Kyiv's refusal

to provide water to the occupied territory, which would de-facto legalize annexation, combined with the unfavorable climate change in the region, significantly exacerbated the existing issue. The Kremlin's pressure on the Ukrainian government through its „fifth column” has so far been ineffective, while a military solution would have been too costly an endeavor for Russia. Therefore, a probable scenario may involve acts of provocation and subversion in Kherson region, including even terrorist acts, combined with saber rattling from Crimea, which may exert additional psychological pressure on the Ukrainian government.

Transformation of the Sea of Azov into a Russian inland water area is impossible without Russia seizing control over the entire Ukrainian littoral area. The main benefits for Russia stemming from such „protectorate” over the southern parts of Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson regions are, firstly, about streamlining logistics and communications between the occupied Donbas and annexed Crimea; and, secondly, about creating a belt of instability in southern Ukraine, not to mention cutting off Ukraine's access to the Sea of Azov. As in the case of the Kherson region, a direct military invasion to „cut through a window” toward Crimea would be costly, given potential losses of human capital, military equipment, funds, and consequences of a new round of Western sanctions. Therefore, if the Kremlin decides to create such a corridor, it will follow the already beaten path – through exporting separatism to the targeted regions. There are certain prerequisites in place to this end. Last month, an office was set up in Zaporizhia region's Melitopol of a local branch of the pro-Russian Cossack Organization, whose members have announced they would engage in protecting public order alongside local police. Such efforts by an organization long supported the Russian Orthodox Church and headed by the notorious O. Panchenko, a notorious figure with the allegedly strong ties to Russia, are a wake-up call for Kyiv.

A comprehensive assessment of the latest developments points to a new stage of the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war that may soon erupt, while the southern part of Ukraine may be the next major domain. Continued militarization of Crimea, long-term Russian aggression in the Black and Azov seas, general mobilization, and the amassing of thousands of troops at the Russia-Ukraine border, revived activity of Russia's agents of influence and proxies in southern Ukraine, and most importantly, the annual joint command-staff exercise Kavkaz-2020 – these are all indicators allowing to suggest that Moscow is prepared for certain special operations, aimed at gaining control over the Ukrainian littoral areas, and that Russia would probably stop short of a full-scale conflict (which is really unlikely, it must be admitted).

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