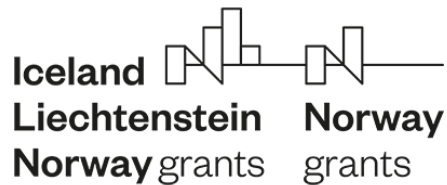


The Crimean Aircraft Carrier.
RUSSIAN FEDERATION
MILITARIZATION OF THE BLACK SEA
FLANKS Policy Brief

Leonardo DINU

The research is a result of the implementation of the bilateral initiative "Enhance knowledge of Russia's behaviour in the Kola Peninsula and the Arctic region, as well as the Crimean Peninsula and the Black Sea region – and to compare in terms of similarities and differences", financed under the Fund for bilateral relations 2014-2021.



Project implemented by



Author:
Leonardo DINU
Editor:
George SCUTARU

Research support:
Izel SELIM
Maria ION
Graphics coordinator:
Izel SELIM

© New Strategy Center, 2020

www.nupi.no

www.newstrategycenter.ro

The Crimean Aircraft Carrier. **Russian Federation Militarization of the Black Sea¹**

Summary

The Black Sea is one of the areas of maximum geostrategic interest for the Russian Federation, due to the confluence of the main economic, trade and transport routes of natural resources to and from the Middle East, North Africa and Eurasia.

After the USSR dissolution in 1991, the Black Sea did not have the same geostrategic importance, but Russia permanently included it in the so-called concept of "near abroad", and this only until the emergence of colorful revolutions around Russia, Rose Revolution (2003 -2004) in Georgia and Orange Revolution (2004-2005) in Ukraine, during which the desire to adhere to Euro-Atlantic values was publicly expressed. Also, in that period, Romania and Bulgaria joined NATO (2004), changing the regional balance of power.

The security situation in the Black Sea region changed dramatically after 2008, when Russian military forces stationed since 1993 in South Ossetia repelled Tbilisi military endeavor to regain the separatist region control, followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the military intervention in Eastern Ukraine

Since then, Russia has engaged in a strong militarization program of the Crimean Peninsula, becoming thus a "power projection platform"² and marked the resumption of Moscow's strong rhetoric on the possibility of using nuclear capabilities, including by redeploying them to Crimea.

¹ This policy brief presents the most important findings and conclusions presented in more detail in the FLANKS Working Paper *The Crimean Aircraft Carrier. Russian Federation Militarization of the Black Sea* prepared jointly by members of the FLANKS project and available at the projects website at <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/flanks-project/>.

² US Naval Institute Article - "NATO Commander Breedlove: Imported Russian Missiles Have Turned Crimea into a Black Sea 'Power Projection' Platform" - Sam LaGrone, February 25, 2015

Why is Crimea important?

All Russian leaders, from Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin today, have paid a special attention to the Crimean Peninsula, because ensures the influence and equidistant control of the maritime communication routes on the entire Black Sea aquarium, from East to West and from the rivers mouths to the straits. Also, Crimea represent a military forward operating base and the starting point for the projection of its military force to the frozen conflicts around Black Sea, but also to the NATO Southern Flank, North Africa and the Middle East, as well as a secondary pathway to the Planetary Ocean.

Russian control of Crimea exerts a political-military pressure on Ukraine, restrain Ukrainian nationalism and refrain anti-Russian sentiments in the region. Also, Moscow exerts political and military pressure on riparian states to limit NATO enlargement, infrastructure and the maneuver of the allied forces, facilitates the access to the Mediterranean Sea and its warm water ports in order to counterbalance the US and NATO naval presence.

And last but not least, creates the premises for the expansion of Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the access to new gas and oil resources in the Black Sea, but also facilitate the protection of its strategic gas pipelines from Russia to the Southern Europe.

Militarization of the Black Sea - Crimea Focus

Russia's illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (March 2014) has brought back the Black Sea importance into the global geopolitical equation, with Russia embarking on an ambitious Black Sea remilitarization program to gain the exclusive control, to assure its freedom of movement in the region, and also to project its political-economic and military interests in other areas of the Mediterranean Sea, North Africa and the Middle East.

The use of military power as the main instrument for fulfilling Russian political and diplomatic objectives also requires the modernization of its military capabilities. Thus, in

the last 6 years, Moscow has constantly and primarily modernized its military capabilities in the Black Sea.

◆ In the first stage, Moscow created a strong **Anti-Access/ Area Denial (A2/AD)** to effectively cover the area of operations of its military forces and through the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula was able to expand the A2/AD umbrella beyond the Extended Black Sea Region in order to provide quick response options in the event of an armed conflict.

Strike capabilities have increased considerably, especially after being equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles, which have a radius of 1500 km (or even 2600 km in the modified version). To them are added the Iskander missiles, with a radius of 500 km, which can also have a nuclear charge, the anti-ship ones Bal (120 km radius) and Bastion (320 km) and air defense systems S-300V4 and S-400 Triumf.

A2/AD capabilities are strengthened by the deployment of Tu-22M3 bombers in the Peninsula, which can use Kh-15 and Kh-22 bombs³. During their missions, the strategic bombers are protected by Su-24 fighter jets, whose range covers almost the entire Black Sea waters. Thus, Russia established an interconnected and multilayered air defense network between Crimea and Southern Military District capable of facing any hostile military action inside the A2/AD umbrella.

◆ The second line of effort is the modernization of the **Black Sea Naval Forces (RBSF)**, for which it was allocated a 2.4 billion USD budget by 2020⁴ for new generations of submarines and coastal defense systems. It is expected that 18 new naval units will be introduced in RBSF, most of which will be equipped with Kalibr missile systems. To which naval aviation units and combat helicopters will be added.

So far, RBSF has received six Diesel Electric submarines all equipped with Kalibr missiles, to corvettes and two minesweepers. If at present RBSF has 12 naval units equipped

³ Russian Defense Ministry Press Office/TASS - Russia to upgrade Tu-22M3 strategic bombers in 2018, 17 Nov 2017

⁴ DefenceTalk.com by AFP: Russia to reinforce Crimea fleet: minister, May 8, 2014

with Kalibr missiles, in the following years their number will double. The Caspian Flotilla was also modernized with two frigates and three corvettes.⁵

With the military intervention in Syria, the RBSF was used for logistics and troop transportation between Russia and Syria, also called the Syrian Express, mainly with landing ships, which contributed to gaining a unique experience that marked the beginning of Russia's expeditionary ambitions.

◆ **The Air Force** was another line of effort characterized primarily by refurbishment of air bases and airfields in Crimea in the first instance, as well as the deployment of new combat and air support capabilities from mainland Russia. The air component has been reinforced by the deployment on the Peninsula of bomber, assault, fighter and army aviation. Belbek and Gvardeyskoe airfields were reconstructed to accommodate Russian long-range bombers.

In total, Russia has more than 85 aircraft of various types and 34 helicopters in Crimea that cover the entire Black Sea airspace⁶, including the straits and the main bases and military facilities located near the coast of Black Sea riparian states.

◆ Russia has consistently upgraded its military capabilities over the past six years. It increased its military personnel from 12,500 to 32,500 in 2020, aiming to reach 43,000 by 2025.

According to the commander of the Joint Forces of Ukraine's Armed Forces LTG Serhiy Nayev⁷, out of 32,500 military personnel deployed in Crimea, 11,500 belong to **Land Forces** and consists of two brigades and one independent battalion, 200 armored vehicles, 31 tanks, 100 artillery systems, and 684 units of different military equipment. In addition, Coastal Defense forces and National Guard units (up to two brigades), as well as the Russian FSB Border Guard Service, have been deployed.

◆ Nuclear Forces

⁵ NavalNews - Russia's Black Sea Fleet Completes the First Stage of Its Modernization, Martin Manaranche, 21 May 2020

⁶ UKRINFORM - 1,100 Russian tanks, 330 warplanes along border with Ukraine, July 3, 2020

⁷ UKRINFORM - About 32,500 Russian soldiers currently stationed in occupied Crimea, July 10, 2020

Although strategic vectors are already deployed in Crimea that can carry nuclear warheads like Tu-22M3 from air, Bastion from land and Kalibr from water, and Moscow has made statements on the possibility of deploying nuclear weapons in the Peninsula, so far, no evidence has been identified. However, activities have been noticed to maintain and modernize the infrastructure of the Feodosiya nuclear depots, which until 1994 (Budapest Memorandum, December 5, 1994) USSR nuclear weapons were stored.

◆ Training and military exercises

The first operational-strategic command and staff exercise with troops after the Cold War took place in 1999 and signaled that Russia must prepare for large-scale wars and regional military conflicts against a near-peer adversary. The resumption of the joint training through operational-strategic exercises took also into account the lessons learned from NATO intervention in the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990's, but also the aspirations of the former communist states to join the Alliance.

In the Black Sea Extended Area (Caspian Sea included), in the Southern Military Region Area of Responsibility respectively, Russia exercises military operations on the South-West strategic direction and in the Northern Caucasus within the operational-strategic exercise codenamed KAVKAZ.

The latest operational-strategic command and staff exercise KAVKAZ 2020 involved (according to various Russian media sources), between 80,000 and 150,000 military personnel and covered all operational environments: land, air, sea, cyber and electronic warfare (EW). Also, about 250 tanks, 450 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, 200 artillery systems and multiple launch rocket systems were involved in the maneuvers and live fire exercises⁸. In order to give it a multinational flavor, under the pretext of the need for joint training to fight terrorism, Moscow has invited several nations to participate with troops or observers in the KAVKAZ 2020 active phase: Armenia, Belarus, China, Myanmar and Pakistan were invited to practice joint actions, while representatives

⁸ International Centre for Defence and Security - Estonia, Kavkaz-2020 Exercises: A Preliminary Analysis, Sergey Sukhankin, October 7, 2020

from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Indonesia, Iran and Sri Lanka participated as observers.⁹

In terms of the scenario, KAVKAZ 2020 (active phase September 21-26) did not differ from the previous operational-strategic exercises focusing on, according to a press statement of the Russian Ministry of Defense, “*combating cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as on fire and electronic warfare activities against entire enemy formations, on training airborne troops’ vertical envelopment capability and ways to rapidly shift between military activities.*”¹⁰

Conclusions

According to the 2015 Russian Naval Doctrine, the Black Sea is designated as being of strategic importance and a political priority objective for Moscow to blocking NATO enlargement and to deploy military capabilities near Russia's borders. The new regional security context after Crimea’s occupation has allowed Russia to initiate an extensive process of modernizing its Black Sea Fleet in order to become a force and instrument for Moscow's policy of securing its political and economic interests in the Black Sea Extended Area.

At the same time, due to the lack of real military expeditionary capabilities, Crimea's integration into Russia's defense architecture was a necessity to providing operational support in deployment of its military forces across the Black Sea to its areas of interest like Mediterranean Sea, Middle East and North Africa, with the intention of establishing new forward operational bases. Thus, together with the frozen conflict zones, already under its control, Russia it has created a strategic "chessboard" which allows it a diverse range of political, military and economic options, especially in the energy field, in the Black Sea Extended Area, Mediterranean Sea, respectively North Africa and the Middle East.

The Syrian conflict was the opportunity that Moscow was waiting for to test its strategy, expeditionary capabilities, new conventional fighting techniques and tactics, but

⁹ Anadolu Agency, Russia starts Kavkaz-2020 military drill, Elena Teslova, September 21, 2020

¹⁰ TASS - Kavkaz-2020 drills to focus on combating cruise missiles, September 21, 2020

also hybrid ones, as well as the effectiveness of weapons. In addition, Moscow has tested the responsiveness and the response of major global players: NATO, the EU, but especially the United States, which it considers its main opponent.

Among the other states bordering the Black Sea, Romania, as a potential target of Russian Federation conventional and hybrid actions, has engaged in an extensive process of modernizing its military forces in almost all operational environments (land, air, naval, cyber) and together with the other regional actors and US support, is conducting a sustained campaign to raise awareness of the aggressive potential of the Russian Federation against NATO and the EU. Also, the Romanian Armed Forces are engaged in a complex of bilateral and NATO forces defensive training military exercises, in order to increase interoperability, strengthen defense capacity, but also to knowing the regional security situation, all contributing to ensure a stable and predictable environment in the region.

However, on medium term, this entire effort of Romania and riparian states will not change the strategic balance in the Black Sea, which will thus remain in Russia's favor, the only viable option being countering this threat through real Allied unity, cohesion and solidarity, which is in fact the foundation of NATO collective defense.

Recommendations

In order to effectively combat Russia's malign influence in all domains: political, military, economic, social, informational, including the confessional, energy and infrastructure, it is necessary that all Black Sea states to agree, in a first stage, a set of political fundamentals in order to harmonize different interests, sometimes even divergent between the countries. Subsequently, based on them, a strategic dialogue could be initiated in order to formulate and implement a common regional strategy. Without this, there will be no unity, no cohesion and no solidarity, which is also concretely reflected in the different Allied approach between the NATO's Northern Flank (Poland and Baltic states), with a strong Enhanced Forward Presence, and the NATO's Southern Flank with a Tailored Forward Presence and a reduced military presence.

Thus, at NATO and EU level, efforts must be made to raise awareness of the need for a unitary strategic approach to Russia's multi-domain threat starting from the North, from the Barents Sea and the Kola Peninsula, to the South, to the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, as long as Russia has a strategic overall approach and uses the perception differences of the threat between states, thus serving Moscow strategic interests and providing the necessary maneuver space to effectively combine conventional and hybrid actions. Also, some Central and Western European countries do not perceive the threat at its full extent. As example, cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns and fake news, political pressure and the use of energy as means of influence, are being used by Russia to the full extent in the Black Sea Region, as a testing ground, which are then used against EU and NATO states.

In conclusion, to counterbalance Russia's aggressive stance, an integrated approach is needed, both at the regional and allied levels, combining efforts to consolidate a credible and sustainable military deterrence posture, along with political and diplomatic concrete efforts and through a unitary, continuous and coherence strategic communication of the Black Sea riparian states.

Major General (Ret.) Leonardo Dinu is a Member of the Scientific Council of New Strategy Center. He retired as a two-star general in the Romanian Army after nearly 38-year career, during which held a variety leadership positions especially in the military intelligence, including most recently as deputy chief of Romanian Military Intelligence Directorate for Operations. In his role at MID, Major General Leonardo Dinu made an important contribution to the organizational and doctrinal transformation of the Romanian Military Intelligence as the setting up of the first OSINT and CyberInt capabilities, development of the first SIGINT Doctrine, the transformation of the ISR architecture and elaboration of the first ISR doctrinal principles of the Romanian Army.



The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI] is a leading centre for research on international issues in areas of particular relevance to Norwegian foreign policy. NUPI has three main pillars of research and expertise: security and risk, growth and development, and international order and governance. The Security and Risk pillar covers traditional security and defence policy and peace operations, as well as other aspects of risk in Norwegian foreign policy related to greater investment, travel and presence abroad. Growth and development focuses on the emerging powers, international economics and developmental issues. Order and governance covers the multilateral system, regional organizations and how diplomacy as an institution works and evolves.



New Strategy Center is a Romanian think tank specialising in foreign, defence and security policy, a non-partisan, non-governmental organisation. New Strategy Center operates at three main levels: providing analytical inputs and expert advice to decision-makers; holding regular debates, both in-house and public, on subjects of topical interest; expanding external outreach through partnerships with similar institutions or organisations in Europe and the US, joint policy papers and international conferences. The Balkans and the Black Sea space are priority areas of interest for New Strategy Center.