

MAYO 2019**Tensions escalate in the Black Sea and the
Eastern Mediterranean***Por Paulo Botta***Abstract**

The main objective of this study is to analyze the presence of the Russian Navy in the Black Sea and in the East Mediterranean Sea, taking into account the operations in Syria and the overall strategy employed in this region.

From our point of view, the Russian strategy aims to strengthen its presence in the Black Sea; to maintain amicable relations with Turkey in an effort to secure passage through the Turkish straits and to establish a continuous presence in the East Mediterranean. Russia wants to ensure that its voice and interests are taken in consideration when discussing the main political, military, and economic issues of the regional agenda.

Gas resources in the East Mediterranean Sea have the potential to trigger the economic development of the region and, at the same time, to spur conflicts between the actors involved.

KEY WORDS: Russia. Black Sea. Mediterranean Sea. International Security.**Introduction**

From a security viewpoint, the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean have become high tension zones, given the likelihood that military conflict will erupt among global and regional powers. This situation materialized following the incorporation of Crimea to the Russian Federation (2014) and the beginning of

CONSEJO ARGENTINO
PARA LAS
RELACIONES
INTERNACIONALESUruguay 1037, piso 1°
C1016ACA
Buenos Aires
República ArgentinaTel. +5411 4811 0071
Fax +5411 4815 4742cari@cari.org.ar
cari.org.ar

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Russian military operations in Syria (2015). Since then, its growth in both complexity and danger has yet to come to a standstill.

In this paper, we will analyze the actors' initiatives in these two geographical areas; in pursuit of their respective interests, as well as the possibilities of cooperation or conflict, particularly in reference to the situation in Syria. Understanding the connecting mechanisms, the means put into action, and the strategies implemented, may help us characterize the regional-international relations, ultimately arriving to conclusions that could be useful to Argentinean interests.

The Black Sea and the Turkish straits

From a geopolitical standpoint, the conflict over the Black Sea is nothing new. In the Modern Era, we can mention the secular dispute between the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire, from the clashes during the First World War, to the tensions during the Cold War when Soviets and NATO members found each other face to face.

However, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Ukrainian conflict signaled the return of the Black Sea as a source of regional and even global tension.

Many authors have pointed out Russia's efforts

to portray the Black Sea as a closed sea (Mare Clausus)¹, thus revealing its perception of this zone as the "south-west flank to protect"², the weakest Russian flank.

The Russian naval strategy, released in 2015, analyzes the joint objectives it hopes to achieve in the Mediterranean, the Azov Sea, and the Black Sea. We should note in respect to the Mediterranean Sea, the objective is to "ensure a permanent and sufficient Russian naval presence in the region" and to "widen the passages between the Crimean ports, the Krasnodar region, and the countries from the Mediterranean watershed"³. This proves that naval presence does not derive from a short-term plan but a long-term strategy. This is an interesting point to analyze, one from which we should learn.

During the Cold War, the Black Sea acted as the boundary between NATO countries and the Soviet Union, intended as a tough operational challenge for the West. This has not changed over time, but only increased in relevance, particularly after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. This Sea is also a priority for NATO, as it has been declared on many occasions.

The Russian Fleet in the Black Sea counts among its naval artifacts six improved Kilo-

class submarines (Project 636.3) with capacity to withstand cruise ship missiles (Kalibr-PL) which added to the A2/AD structures, based on S-400 SAM and Bastion-P systems, turns the region into a challenging scenario for potential competitors.

The so-called “Straits matter” was one of the key issues during the first decades in the 20th century. A series of political events: the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the establishment of the Turkish Republic, and the Italian fascist Imperialism, led to the dawning of a legal order oriented to regulate the riverside and non-riverside countries.

Consequently, this is how the Montreux’s Convention signature took place in 1936, referring to the straits regime which gave Turkey full control over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. As compensation, Turkey obliges itself to allow unrestricted transit of civil ships during times of peace⁴.

The rights of the riverside countries (Turkey, Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria) differ from those of the non-riverside ones in respect to our issue of interest: military ships. The non-riverside countries’ military ships are not permitted to stay for more than 21 days⁵ in the Black Sea and cannot surpass the 15.000

displacement tones⁶, among other restrictions. The 15.000 tones restriction also applies for the Riverside countries’ military ships and, in our area of interest, the submarines must go “during daylight, non-submerged and alone” through the straits⁷.

This regulation marks the limit of the Russian fleet on the hour of their arrival to the Mediterranean Sea, from their base in Sebastopol in the Black Sea, through the straits. It also points out the limitations of riverside countries when it comes to facing Russian power and the non-riverside countries’ possibilities in this regard. The event which took place in the Kerch strait in November, 2018 is a clear demonstration of Russian capabilities in this geographical area. In reference to the issues under analysis, an Official Russian Document, “Russian Federation state policy in Naval Operations basis until 2030”, states its objectives: “improvement of the Black Sea’s fleet operational and contesting capacities, widening the joint capacities in the Crimean peninsula” and “ensure the permanent Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea and other relevant global naval zones, including the main lines of communication areas”⁸.

Although public information concerning military capacities of Moscow are usually emphasized by Russian and foreign specialized media⁹, there are doubts around the actual capacity of some systems¹⁰. Even while avoiding extremes, we must highlight Russian military capability is the strongest in the Black Sea.

Concerning the riverside countries, the Turkish fleet is most significant, much more than those of Georgia, Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria. Rising importance of the Black Sea has pushed Turkey to begin building a new naval base in the eastern area of its coast to supplement the capacities that, since Cold War times, have been concentrated in the western area of Karadeniz Ereğli, located at 200 km on the east of Istanbul. It will be the ninth base of the Turkish navy. The new Turkish base will be located in Sürmene city¹¹ and despite that construction has just begun, the decision sends a clear signal about Turkish interest in the area. This interest dates back to the “Black Sea Harmony” operation in 2004, a time when the links between Turkey, Russia, and other riverside countries were not nearly as conflictive as they are today.

NATO maintains two multinational naval groups which conduct patrols as well as military exercises in the Black Sea. According to the information provided, the patrols took place

over 120 days in 2018, a considerable increase when compared to 2017, when they extended for just 80 days¹².

Implications for the Russian strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean

The capacity Russia has developed is not limited solely to this area, but extends through to the Turkish straits, and with the restrictions we have pointed out, is reaching the Eastern Mediterranean. It is evident that Moscow aims to gain real and effective presence in this region; this has been apparent since September 2015, when Russian military operations began in Syria. In this regard, a “Permanent Operational Formation” was established, dependent on the Black Sea Fleet. This formation, in accordance with the Russian doctrine, comprises between five and six ships under the leadership of an O-6 range official (Marine Commodore in the Argentine Army). In spite of this, it is still far from the presence it had during the soviet period, when the N°5 Squad from the URSS comprised between forty and fifty boats under the authority of an O-7 in the Mediterranean (commodore, in the Argentine Army). In simple terms, the growth of Russian presence

in the Mediterranean has not halted. In a signed agreement with the Damascus government, Russia received an installation of logistic support in the port of Tartus (commonly labeled as “the Russian navy base(d)”) and permission to use the military airport of Hmeimim. Russia has signed a similar agreement with Egypt and is considering signing comparable agreements with Lebanon and Libya¹³.

While the exact number of air and naval assets present in the Mediterranean remains unknown, we can say with certainty that they are not few, and as indicated on previous pages, they will not be retired in the short term. The logistic installation agreement in Tartus establishes that Russia can maintain up to eleven ships in the area.

As the fence over Idlib is closed the moment these lines are written, (March 2019) we can affirm that Russia maintains in the Eastern Mediterranean a modernized submarine, Kilo class, and the “SSK B-265 Krasnodar” which crossed the Turkish Straits on March 14th. On March 15th, the modern frigate Almirante Gorchkov (Proyekt 22350) moved from its base in the North Sea to Syrian coasts, through Sicilian Straits, with its support embarkations (Elbrouz, the tugboat Nikolai Chiker and the tank Kama)¹⁴.

They will be met by the frigate Almirante Essen (Proyekt 11356M) located in the region and the anti-submarine destructor ASM Severomorsk (Class Udalot, Proyekt 1155) that after months of reparations in the Black Sea, crossed the Straits in the beginning of March. In Tartus there are two additional modernized Kilo class submarines (Kilo class), operating: B-268 Velikiy Novgorod (y) and B-271 Kolpino. To the capacity of launching cruise Kalibr missiles that these means have, there should be added the Russian means in the Black Sea and the fleet in the Caspian Sea which can reach the Eastern Mediterranean, as they have already done in the beginning of the Russian military operations in Syria.

Despite our attempt to avoid exaggerating Russian military capacities in the region, we must recognize that their presence is one that assures its political interests are taken into account. The old play on words “words without swords are just words” gains meaning in this type of situation.

The limits Geography imposes on the deployment of forces with political aims, remind us of the perennial significance of geopolitics when analyzing international politics¹⁵. Russia’s need to count on Turkish support to display its naval capacity from its

territory to Syria, as well as on the support of Iran and Iraq to display its air assets, explains how important are for Moscow the relations with these key states.

Gas and pipelines

While it is necessary for us to consider military interests, they should not be the sole focus. There are important economic interests we must acknowledge, especially when we consider the significant gas resources of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea in front of the coasts of Lebanon, Israel, Greece, Turkey, Egypt and Cyprus¹⁶.

Russian companies are making efforts to increase their presence on these sites. In this, we are able to observe how countries utilize their strengths in various areas: military, political and economic to strategically achieve their objectives.

However, we would be wrong if we considered it strictly from the profits' point of view; though a centerpiece, we must consider the geopolitical dimension as well, as any new gas supply to the European markets represents a potential danger to the advantageous position Russia holds, even in spite of the sanctions imposed on this country since 2014.

In this sense, we could even speak of a mutual understanding with the potential to lead to an alliance between Greece, Israel and Cyprus, regarding the exploitation of these resources. On December 20th, 2018 the representatives of the three countries signed (EastMed,) an agreement to move forward with the EastMed pipeline project, which would carry the gas from those countries' offshore deposits to Europe, a project supported by the United States and the European Union¹⁷.

The instability of the area will delay the development of these projects, this is undeniable. While it is clear Russia's interest in obtaining a portion of these benefits, we cannot affirm that it will be ready to actively harm other states if their companies fail to prosper.

Comments from the end of the world

When analyzing situations such as those of the Black Sea or the Mediterranean, it is easy to fall into the simplification of analyzing them just as a military game of forces' deployment, pointing out capabilities and limitations, and observing what consequences these actions could have in the political and the diplomatic spheres. The importance of

analyzing political events in geographical areas other than one's own, is the possibility to learn from other experiences, from the way in which other actors act, and take note of potential similarities with our own situation. In the case under study, it is important to emphasize the significance of military means when using them as tools of state power. The Argentine leadership does not fully understand that a military capacity in accordance with the position our country occupies in the international concert –in terms of territorial extension, bi-continental position considering Antarctica, natural resources, etc.– is an element that would help progress in other areas, such as the political and diplomatic fields.

Conclusions

Operationally, the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean are seen as a unit from the Russian Federation's point of view. Although the legal regime of the Turkish Straits establishes limitations in terms of military deployment, it is not an insurmountable obstacle as Russian naval media can access the eastern Mediterranean by other means.

The conflict in Syria has allowed Russian forces to increase their capabilities in the region and

we cannot think that, in the short or long term, this trend will be reversed. Much less so if we consider the growing military ties, nevertheless with some opposition, between Russia and the governments of Lebanon, Egypt, Cyprus and Libya, as well as the growing Russian-Israeli bilateral agenda. Since the beginning of the Russian military presence in Syria in September 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin have met ten times.

Discoveries of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean will undoubtedly constitute an additional element. For states with economic and geopolitical interests to try to justify their presence and Russia will not be the exception. Given that states' behavior cannot be compartmentalized, the interactions between the economic, military, political and cultural links form a single unit. The countries with military presence will be, in this way, in a better position to promote the interests of their national business sectors, to promote their culture and values, and ultimately, to reach their objectives. However, the density of strengths in this zone significantly increases the possibility of collisions unless the areas of influence are duly defined by the parties.

Presently, the Black Sea and the East Mediterranean are two of the regions where it is most likely conflict will erupt between the parties involved. They constitute the Fulda gap of the 21st century.

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Paulo Botta / Profesor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina. Doctor and Diploma of Advanced Studies at the Complutense University of Madrid (Spain). He holds a degree in International Relations from the Catholic University of Córdoba (Argentina). E-mail: paulobotta@uca.edu.ar

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