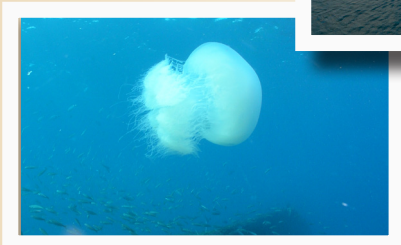
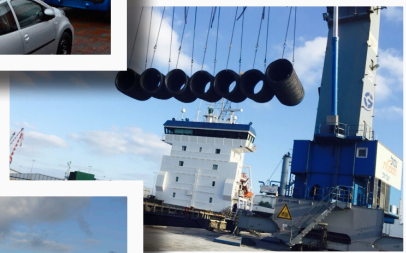
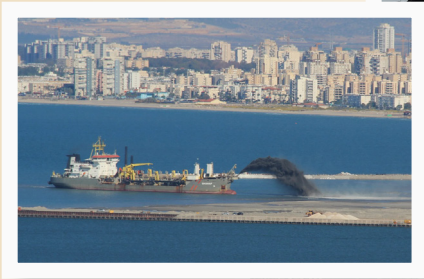


# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2018/19

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## The Activity of the Russian Navy in 2018 the Middle East

*Ido Gilad*

### Background

During 2018, the Russian navy reinforced its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. This can be seen primarily in the buildup on the Syrian coast in the area of the Port of Tartus. The acceleration of activity in the Eastern Mediterranean in parallel to the continued fighting in Syria reached a peak in September 2018, particularly following the downing of a Russian spy plane over the Mediterranean. In the Black Sea, Russia continued to strengthen its hold on the Crimean Peninsula. The inauguration of the Crimea Bridge by Putin (in May 2018) reintroduced the maritime front into the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. This is after Russia reneged on previous agreements reached in 2003 with regard to the freedom of passage through the Kerch Strait under the completed Crimea Bridge – the entrancement to the Sea of Azov. This tension has the potential for escalation and the creation of an active front between Russia and Ukraine, particularly since the latter has recently received the support of Western and NATO nations. On November 25, 2018, Russia stopped a tug accompanied by two gunships of the Ukrainian navy, claiming that it was a provocation as they refused to stop and pass an inspection. The Russians fired on the vessels, injuring two seamen, and rammed the tug. The Vessels are being held at the Russian naval base in Kerch and their crews were imprisoned for two months in Russia. The Russian move is part of its occupation of Crimea since 2014 and evolved a Ukrainian declaration of an emergency alert for 30 days. Russia was condemned worldwide, and it appears that the situation will raise the level of escalation. The advantages of Russian control at two points of 'forward deployment'—the ports of Tartus and Sevastopol—will allow Russia to strengthen the maritime connection between them and will reduce constraints on vessels under the Russian flag while passing through the Kerch, Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits (Fig. 1).

Another global focus of attention for the Russians is the Northern Passage along the northern coast of Russia. The Russians expect that global warming will facilitate the exploitation of natural resources in this region. The possibility is also being considered of using the Northern Passage—once the ice has melted in the future, or already at present, as ice has become thinner—which will make it possible for Russian icebreakers to create a passage for shipping. This route has been called the “Russian Suez Canal” and its key advantage shortens thus reduces the cost of

shipping from East Asia to north Europe. The realization of this initiative will have implications for our region as well. First, the affection on China to decide whether this move which they call the 'Ice Silk Road' competes or complements with their current initiative named 'Belt and Road initiative', that President Xi launched in 2013 and intends to connect China to Europe (see following section: on the potential developing of the Northern Passage). Furthermore, in the longer run, it is possible that a reduction in the usage of the Suez Canal will have an effect on the Egyptian economy. It should be mentioned that the strategic alliance between Russia and China has been strengthened this year. Process is still being developed and should be observed.



Fig. 1: Three straits in the Black Sea – the Dardanelles, the Bosphorus and the Kerch.

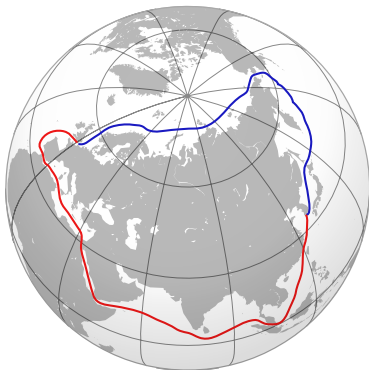


Fig. 2: The northern route: The northern route (blue) and the traditional southern route through the Suez Canal (in red), source: Wikipedia

## The Eastern Mediterranean

Russia's foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean was reinforced in 2018. This trend was expressed by the Commander of the Russian Navy (already in February). In his description of the naval part in the fighting in Syria up to that point (about six months before it demonstrated a massive presence during September 2018; see below). Admiral Vladimir Korolov stated that "the navy has been involved in the fighting since the beginning of Russian activity against terror in Syria (September 2015). The Navy has acquired its experience since then, mainly by launching long-range cruise missiles from ships and submarines. The Admiral added that during the operations in Syria, his navy carried out more than ten attacks using more than 100 long-range cruise missiles fired by surface ships and submarines. These attacks destroyed more than 80 operating sites of "illegal armed groups."<sup>1</sup> Putin himself (Sochi, May 16, 2018) instructed the Ministry of Defense to maintain a permanent presence of attack vessels that carry 'Caliber' missiles in the Mediterranean,<sup>2</sup> in order to deal with the "continuing threat of international terror attacks in Syria." The activity in Syria challenged the navy – as it increased the scope of its missions, thus contributed significantly the operational and technical sense and experience.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 3: The Commander of the Russian Navy – Admiral Vladimir Korolov speaking at a conference at the Naval Museum in St. Petersburg (February 9, 2018), Source: from the Russian Ministry of Defense site

- 1 Russian Ministry of Defense site, February 9, 2018; Sputnik site, February 8, 2018.
- 2 Путин: корабли ВМФ с ракетами "Калибр" будут нести постоянную вахту в Средиземном море <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/5205614>
- 3 Корабли с «Калибрами» отправятся на постоянную вахту в Средиземное море <https://iz.ru/744028/2018-05-16/korabli-s-kalibrami-otpraviatsia-na-postoiannuiu-vakhtu-v-sredizemnoe-more>

The permanent presence in the Port of Tartus and the Khmeimim Airport (defined by the Commander of the Navy<sup>4</sup> as a “Naval airport”) received the status of a Presidential Directive from the Kremlin in December 2017 following a year-long ratification process by Russia and Syria. President Putin even visited Syria (his first visit since Russia became involved in the fighting there- about two years earlier).<sup>5</sup> According to the Kremlin, a directive signed by President Putin provides Russia’s activity with legitimacy according to international law, since Russia (and also Iran) were invited by the local sovereign, namely President Assad, to operate on Syrian soil.<sup>6</sup> Assad and members of his government also reiterated on several occasions along the year about their invitation to Russia and Iran.

Russia and Iran helped this year, too to tilt the balance in favor of Assad, in restoring most of the territory he lost in Syria, apart from the Idlib enclave (located on Syria’s border with Turkey about 100 km inland). In his aforementioned visit to Syria (late 2017) Putin related to the success in destroying the Islamic State. In his view, this advantage would allow Russia to withdraw some of its forces, as of other countries, too. The issue was mentioned in some occasions during the year (for example, in June<sup>7</sup> and on October 3, 2018<sup>8</sup>). It is worth emphasizing that by declaring a potential withdrawal of some Russian forces, there was no mentioning of the Russian naval units among them ! It is believed that naval units are part of the forces to remain in Syria, also to assist the Syrian regime in fighting the regels? (primarily in the Idlib region).

A permanent Russian military presence will preserve its influence over the Syrian regime in the future and similarly will ensure Russia’s regional and global interests in view of the complex reality emerging in Syria.<sup>9</sup>

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4 See footnote 1.

5 Valdimir Putin visited Khmeimim Air Base in Syria.  
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56351>

6 From the Kremlin site <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/56562>. The President has signed the Federal Law On Ratifying the Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on Extending the Area of the Russian Navy’s Inventory and Logistics Support Centre in the Port of Tartus and the Entering by Russian Federation Military vessels into the Territorial Sea, Inland Waters and Ports of the Syrian Arab Republic, December 29, 2017

7 <http://tass.com/defense/1008504> From Tass, June 7, 2018. In relating to the withdrawal from Syria, Putin stated that “there are two sites where our forces are deployed – the Port of Tartus and the Khmeimim base. At this stage, we have no plans to withdraw these forces.”

8 From Tass, October 3, 2018 <http://tass.com/politics/1024196>.

9 From the site of the Intelligence Heritage Center, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/he>

The aforementioned assessment is manifested in the continued presence of naval units, however, since October 2018 also on the deployment of S-300 ground-to-air missile batteries, were brought to Syria following the downing of the 'Ilyushin- 38' Russian spy plane (see below).<sup>10</sup> Russian Minister of Defense,<sup>11</sup> stated that these batteries were brought to Syria to be delivered furtherly to the Syrian army.

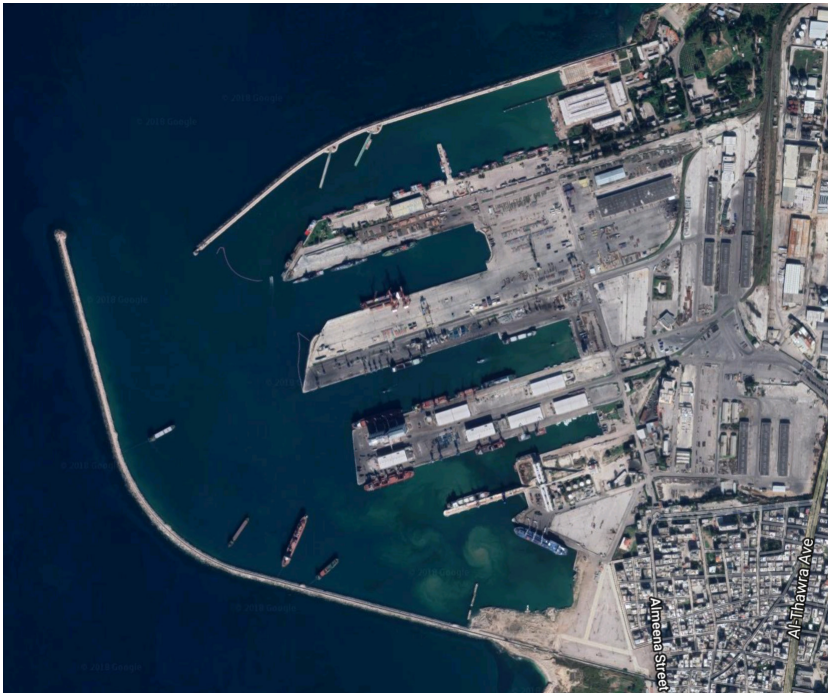


Fig. 4: The Port of Tartus

In conclusion, Russian naval units will apparently not be withdrawn from Syria. In contrary, they will build up their forces along the Syrian coast, primarily in the Port of Tartus. Such measures should provide Russia with maritime potential to act in the Eastern Mediterranean, to gain a geostrategic achievement with implications on the naval presence in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, both referred among the Theater arenas of the Russian navy.<sup>12</sup>

10 <http://tass.com/world/1024058>. A report that the missiles were unloaded early on the morning of October 3rd at Khmeimim airport.

11 From Tass, October 3, 2018 <http://tass.com/world/1024146>.

12 Mirkin, Zvi "Guideline of Russia's Naval Policy as a Continuation of the Soviet and Russian Bureaucratic-Military Tradition", *Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2017-18*, Shaul Chorev (ed.). Haifa University Publications, Haifa Center for Maritime Policy and Strategy.

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The Black Sea fleet by its forces, marked 235 years (June 2018) since its foundation. An event that symbolizes the historical activities in the region.<sup>13</sup>

### **The effect of the Idlib events**

The Idlib enclave was a potential area for attack (late August 2018) also by the US, British and French fleets. The goal was to deter Assad's army from carrying out further chemical attacks in that region and in general. Recall to these navies launches (in mid-2017) of cruise missiles by its surface and submarine platforms against targets in Syria occurred as a response due to Assad Army continuing chemical attacks, which contradicts the international law. Western navies last attacked from sea in April 2018, after a chemical attack by Assad's army in Duma, near Damascus, a week earlier.<sup>14</sup>

As a step meant to prevent Western navies from carrying out further missile attacks (referred by the Russians as "provocation") on the Idlib area against Assad's army, the Russian navy declared, on August 29, 2018, the closure of a maritime area in the eastern Mediterranean, for the holding of an exercises by Russian air and naval forces. Although number of closures held during the year, this time played a larger scale compared to previous instances - since the collapse of the USSR. The maneuver was held from September 1-8, 2018, and included about 25-30 vessels, of which ten carried missiles, including two Kilo submarines. The vessels were under the Black Sea fleet, the Northern Sea fleet and the Caspian Sea flotilla.<sup>15</sup> Also included in the exercise were 34 naval aircraft, according to the Russian Minister of Defense in a later comment (on November 2, 2018). He also referred to as a pioneer maneuver of its scope in the Mediterranean, and that further exercises should be held on a permanent basis..." The maneuver in September (as apparently the future ones, too – I.G.) was managed both from "the headquarters in St. Petersburg and the 'support facility' in Syria's Tartus". The need for this maneuver was to "independently cope with a wide range of missions in a changing situation."<sup>16</sup> The repeated statements by the Minister of Defense, highlighted once more the importance which Moscow attributes to the Russia's foothold in this naval/aerial theater.

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13 <http://tass.com/defense/721411>

14 Site of the US Department of Defense, April 14.

15 <https://iz.ru/782349/aleksei-ramm-aleksei-kozachenko-kirill-gulov-elmar-bainazarov/morskoj-shchit-dlia-sirii>

16 <http://tass.com/defense/1029078>

### The downing of the Russian 'Ilyushin-20' spy plane

During the second half of September 2018, the Russians (for a second time that month) closed off the maritime zone west of the Syrian coast. This time it was in response to the downing of the 'Ilyushin-20' spy plane west of Baniyas. The plane was hit by the fire of a Syrian ground-to-air SA-5 missile battery, which carried out a massive and a complete inefficient fire, following an earlier Israeli air force attack on targets in the Dakiya district. Closing the maritime zone originally intended to allow Russian naval forces of 8 vessels, to conduct search and rescue operations for the remains of the plane, its systems and its 15 crew members.<sup>17</sup> Naval vessels added to the searches a deterrence from foreign forces to operate in Syria and disturb neither the Russians nor their allies. Even though the downing of the plane was an error by the Syrian ground-to-air batteries and a lack of communication with the Russian command, several formal authorities in Moscow as the army, Ministry of Defense, and Foreign Ministry - blamed Israel for the outcome, claiming for its overall responsibility that caused the incident. These authorities also criticized Israel for other series of recent attacks in Syria, mainly against military targets and in particular those of Iran and Hezbollah. As the aircraft was downing "fog of war" that followed it, it made Russians blame also the involvement of a French frigate which was operating at the time east of Cyprus.<sup>18</sup> It should be mentioned that President Putin personally took a more moderate stance than blaming solely Israel for its responsibility, and demanded also from Russians and Syrian forces to draw conclusions from the incident.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, during most of the period since then, and in response to Russian voices that are demanding hegemonic control in Syria, it seems that his position towards Israel was hardening.

The operations of the Russian navy as manifested in the aforementioned events of September 2018, were made possible regarding to the Russian control of the Port of Tartus and of the Syrian coast in general. These activities furtherly confirm the arguments that support the need for Russia to maintain its presence and influence in Syria. This is in line with Russian interests, that include Tartus as a permanent base for the Russian navy, and the adoption of Syria as a permanent Russian 'forward base' in the region. Also, as a territorial foothold in the Mediterranean and the international arena. Following are levels which represent this approach:

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17 <http://tass.com/emergencies/1022043>.

18 <http://tass.com/defense/1022076>.

19 <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/591639>.



**The strategic perspective:** The incident of the downing of the aircraft demonstrated Russian superpower status and its involvement in the Mediterranean theater as a dominant player; the exploitation of the event in order to make a claim for the need to limit Israeli and perhaps even American activity in the Syrian domain; an opportunity to express solidarity (even if only in theory) with their Syrian and Iranian allies on the one hand as Turks on the other (see below for further details on Turkey); presenting the response dictated from “above” in order to generate an atmosphere of crisis (perhaps even a prolonged one) with respect to Israel. Notwithstanding the limited freedom of action that Russia allowed Israel prior to the downing of the airplane - in order to balance the Iranian equation in Syria, have limited Israel to operate, since the downing of the airplane (in mid-September). Nonetheless, the coordination between Russia and Israel apparently remains in place, see below.

**The operational perspective:** An opportunity to enable Russia to further entrench its Syrian bases, upgrading the military systems and their deployment along the Syrian coast. The fundamental claim is for the necessity to protect Russian forces. Although the 'S-300' batteries were provided to Syria, it appears that the immediate concern was for Russian forces use, rather than the concern to their Syrian ally (who showed low level of skills, responsibility and even reliability while downing the airplane). In addition to the 'S-300' batteries, Russia has deployed electronic warfare systems along the Syrian coast which purpose is to locate and disrupt the electronic warfare of foreign navies and air forces operating in the air, sea or any Syrian soil. Coastal intelligence gathering and defense systems like the 'Bastion' followed its deployment and increase the advantage of the Russia even more. Thus, a lesson to emphasize is the coordination and communication measures Israel should strengthen and extended with the Russians, although it may reduce Israel's naval freedom to operate in the Eastern Mediterranean. The various weapon systems - deployment in the Syrian theater, provide the Russians with an additional advantage, i.e. the ability to test their weapons systems on the battlefield. Furthermore, the Russians gain the opportunity to study the Western operational and technological responses to their own systems.

**The tactical perspective:** The 'Il-20' downing also demonstrated essential need for a control on the Port of Tartus and Khmeimim airport, in order to facilitate a permanent deployment of Russian's air units and naval units. This may provide a possibility for an immediate response or necessaire intervene (as was shown in September 2018) on an ad-hoc basis. Either for search and rescue purposes on sea, or for the closure of maritime zones, to ensure Russian's control in the theater. This includes

defensive patrols, ability to attack quality targets on land from surface /under-surface vessels, transportation and delivery of supplies, as well as weapons, ammunition, etc. Developments on the seashore will supply with infrastructures to be used and provide economical profits.

### **A Conclusion for the foothold in Syria**

The major presence in the Port of Tartus and the Khmeimim airport provides Russia with an opportunity for a permanent control on the territory for another 49 years (with almost an automatic extension for additional 25 more years), by the lease agreement. The agreement also allows a Russian defensive deployment for its own protection purposes – from sea and air. These foreign bases, which have been established along the Syrian coast, provide a comprehensive framework for a full spectrum of maritime interests shared both by the hosted as the host countries. These among others include search and rescue, maintenance, transport, security or any other operational, civilian or hybrid activity, as can be carried out far from Russia's shores. The Syrian case is unique and since the Soviet era Russia has never abandoned its coastal foothold in the Port of Tartus. The port had been served as Russia's only platform outside its territory, in view of the fact that various countries in the Middle East have not always provided Russia with full operational freedom in using their ports. Moreover, Turkish control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits could make passage of Russian vessels difficult, even impossible at extreme, particularly in a military confrontation. Therefore, the buildup in the Port of Tartus, which is relatively close to Russia but is beyond the Black Sea and the Turkish- straits, preforms an historical importance.<sup>20</sup> The current mission in the foreign port is listed on the site of the Russian Ministry of Defense as the fourth task (out of five) for the Russian navy. This task relates to "the Russian need to ensure its naval presence in the oceans and seas, to show the flag and military forces, also by visits of the navy's ships in foreign countries."<sup>21</sup> The explicit mention of the Mediterranean as a part of the Russian activity in the Black Sea represents its continues strategic focus and importance. The activity in the region, as expressed during the past year and described above, is with full accordance to the official document of "Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the

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20 Berkovski, A. (2018), "Foreign bases in the Mediterranean," University of Haifa Publication, Chaiken Chair of Geostategy, p. 6, 9 [Hebrew].

21 Site of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, Navy page.

Period until 2030”, which was formulated and approved by Putin on July 20, 2017.<sup>22</sup> The Russian Navy is described in that document as “one of the effective deterrent efforts that protect the Russian strategy.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, the war in Syria is mentioned primarily as one of the international points that threaten potentially Russian strategic interests.<sup>24</sup> Viewing the Navy’s perspective of activity during the past year, lead to the assumption that region will continue to serve as a key focus for Russian’s efforts. In where those principles aforementioned policy with accordance to the document - are being implemented in practice.

### **The Black Sea and the Crimean Peninsula**

Another area of interest in where the Russian navy reinforced its status during the past year (and since 2014) is the Crimean Peninsula. Nevertheless, the claim that Russia “annexed the peninsula, or recovered ownership”<sup>25</sup>, 60 years after Khrushchev handed it over to Ukraine. Recall that both countries were once part of the USSR, and the city of Sebastopol, exclusively kept its status as the Hub port for the Russian navy in the Black Sea, thus in practice remained under Moscow’s authority by a special arrangement. The majority of the population considered itself Russians in the city and in Crimea as a whole. The Russian language remained the dominant one. Russia is currently in a final stage for building the Crimea bridge (name was decided upon a referendum in December 2017, and the bridge was inaugurated in May 2018 by President Putin). This massive project crosses over the Kerch Bay and Strait has 19 kilometers in length and facilitates various land transportation from the mainland, the city of Novosibirsk towards the Crimean Peninsula, over the direction to the cities of Sevastopol and Simferopol.<sup>26</sup> Among limitations of the bridge emphasized its height of only 33 meters. While the strait itself is narrow and shallow, thus limit the passage for large ships. Although the sides in conflict: Russia and Ukraine came to an agreement on the free use of the strait already in 2003— with accordance to the international definition of ‘innocent passage’—the building of the bridge was the final step in the Russian annexation of the Crimea after 2014, and by de facto left for the Russians the control on maritime passage. By these circumstances, Kerch

22 The site of the Kremlin: document 555127 signed by President Putin – “Foundations of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period until 2030”.

23 Ibid., Chapter 4, paragraph 32 and 38.

24 Ibid., chapter 2, paragraph 27.

25 Borshchetskaya, A. (2016). *Russia in the Middle East*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy P. 18.

26 <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/5203942> Tass Agency in Russian.

strait renewed a maritime dispute between Moscow and Kiev, that increased during the recent months and cast a shadow over the passage of ships into the Azov Sea.



Fig. 5: Construction of the bridge over the Kerch Strait



Fig. 4: The Crimea Bridge under construction

The dispute reached its peak on November 25, 2018 when a tug boat accompanied by two patrol boats of the Ukrainian navy were requested by Russian vessels of the Federal Security Forces (FSB) to halt before passing through the strait. As the Ukrainians refused, Russian's vessels set a warning fire, which wounded two sailors, and the tugboat was rammed. Russia accused Ukraine of provocative behavior and claimed they had violated the International Convention Law of the Sea. The Ukrainian crew of 24 was interrogated and imprisoned in Russia, being accused of violating Russian sovereignty and causing damage to Russian property (November 27) according to Russia's law they could be sentenced up to 6 years in prison.<sup>27</sup> Vessels are still in hold at Russian naval base in Kerch.

The dispute had been examined in the international arena, including the UN Security Council, while Ukraine declared (on November 26) an emergency situation in the country for a period of 30 days. At this stage, it is not clear whether this flare-up between Russia, Ukraine and its partners in NATO and the West, will lead to ?or how would it end.<sup>28</sup> It should be mentioned that on September 23, 2018 two vessels of the

<sup>27</sup> The Russians accused the Ukrainian flotilla of violating the International Convention on the Law of the Sea and creating a provocation according to paragraphs 19 and 21 of the UN International Convention, Chapter 3 with respect to the passage of all types of vessels; from [http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos\\_e.pdf](http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf) (by the generosity of Dr. Benny Shpeiner). For a description of the incident, see the Red Star in Russian: <http://redstar.ru/vlasti-ukrainy-organizovali-provokatsiyu> and Putin's comments on November 27, in for example: Tass <http://tass.com/politics/1032781>.

<sup>28</sup> [www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_strait\\_to\\_war\\_russia\\_and\\_ukraine\\_clash\\_in\\_the\\_sea\\_of\\_azov](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_strait_to_war_russia_and_ukraine_clash_in_the_sea_of_azov) from October 2, 2018.

Ukrainian navy passed under the bridge on their one way northbound to Mariupol in the Azov sea. These vessels were accompanied by the Russian coast guard and there was no incident.<sup>29</sup> It appears that Kiev is seeking to demonstrate an Ukrainian maritime presence in the Azov Sea and its ports, namely Mariupol and Berdiansk.<sup>30</sup> In October 2018, the possibility arose that Ukraine would invite NATO warships for a maneuver in the Azov Sea, which was perceived by the Russian Foreign Minister as a threat to Russia's borders. Minister Lavrov referred on this event also to the agreement reached with Ukraine, regarding the passage of warships in the Kerch Strait (below the Crimea Bridge).<sup>31</sup> Russia views the passage to be under its sovereignty, even though in practice this policy has so far been demonstrated towards Ukrainian warships solely. President Trump has referred to the Russian action as an act of "aggression",<sup>32</sup> while Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov described it as a response to a "provocation", or in the words of Prime Minister Medvedev "an unfriendly act [by Ukraine] that will create problems later on."<sup>33</sup> It appears that the Sea of Azov has the potential to become a front line in the dispute between Russia and the West.



Fig. 7: The Sea of Azov and the Strait of Kerch that separates it from the Black Sea Source: see footnote 30.

29 <http://tass.com/world/1022782>

30 <https://nevnov.ru/598592-nikakogo-boya-i-byt-ne-moglo-voennyi-ekspert-prokomentiroval>.

31 <http://tass.com/defense/1026652>

32 Washington Post <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/i-dont-like-that-aggression-trump-threatens-to-cancel-putin-meeting-over-clash-with-ukraine>. Quote in Tass: <http://tass.com/world/1033008>

33 Novosti, November 27, 2018 <https://riafan.ru/1125729-na-zaderzhannom-katere-vmsu-nikopol-nashli-dokument-s-osoboi-zadachei-kieva>.

In conclusion, already in 2014 Putin drew a connection between Ukraine and the Middle East.<sup>34</sup> The buildup of the Russian maritime strongholds in the Crimea and Tartus are connected one to the other and provide Russia with the possibility to project its power and to expand its territorial hold beyond its borders. Measures as such may include also a deployments of various weapons as other abilities with accordance . These strongholds provide the Russian navy with the advantage of forward deployment. Deploying of vessels there, could allow various missions, as well as a demonstration of its power towards other players. The situation can allow Russia to mitigate the constraints imposed by foreign players, particularly Ukraine and Turkey, as Russia needs of free passage through the Kerch, Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits.

Such a forward deployment but for the facilitation of transporting and supplies by sea, provides also a backup for land and air transports. The forward geographic deployment provides another additional advantage, whose implementations suits with Russia's strategy, and is no less important than the one which vessels forward deployment do play. i.e. the possibility to deploy also various weaponries on the forward coasts and its nearby areas. This also raises the possibility to create deterrence of the enemy, by restricting his freedom of action (A2AD). Among all relevant means to accomplish this, a focus should be put on the possibilities to integrate unmanned vessels and aircrafts in various missions, either already existed platforms, or others to be developed in the future, according to the needs.

## Turkey

The important maritime space between Ukraine and Syria is within the territory of another influential player in the region – Erdogan, the ruler of Turkey. Not only Turkey's geostrategic location is important but also its relations with Russia, that apparently have tightened during the past year. Also, as Turkey's growing economic which is more depended on Russia and especially Russian natural gas. Turkey, as Iran, has joined the partnership dealing with the crisis in Syria, with Russia that took the leading role. The Russian-Turkish cooperation increased during the second half of the year, as part of the events in the Irbil enclave and later on, with the absorption of refugees from Syria on Turkish territory (an agreement signed with the EU already in 2016). Putin has presented himself as a potential, if not actual, alternative to the West under U.S. leadership, particularly in view of the deterioration in the West's relations with Erdogan. It appears that the memory of the incident in which a

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34 See footnote 26.

Russian 'Sukhoi 24' aircraft was downed by Turkey (in November 2015) has faded. The maritime implication relates on the acquisition of Russian weaponry by Turkey. Russian economic involvement in the production of natural gas and its transport (by land/sea) through Turkey's territory will constitute a continual challenge for Russia. This challenge will affect Russia's presence and that of Russian companies, such as Gazprom, in the region and the overall Russian tendency is to prevent the creation of alternatives that might harm Russian hegemony over the supply of gas to Europe.<sup>35</sup> This hegemony has been reinforced by the inauguration (on November 20, 2018) of the maritime segment of the "Turkish" gas pipeline at which Putin and Erdogan were present (by videoconference). The pipeline crosses the Black Sea from the Russian coast (the Krasnodar area) to the Turkish coast and is expected to carry 15.75 billion cubic meters of gas to Turkey starting from 2019.<sup>36</sup> In conclusion, it is worth mentioning the statement of the Turkish Prime Minister (in November 2018) that Russia is today one of its most important partners and Turkey will do all it can in order to develop the cooperation between the two countries on several levels. Nonetheless, the leading issue is the need to stabilize the situation in Syria and particularly in the Idlib enclave. At the Sochi Conference (in September 2018), Putin gave Erdogan an opportunity to find a solution, in the meantime without committing to a timetable.<sup>37</sup> A senior official in the Russian Foreign Ministry stated (in November 2018) that Russia views the partnership and the cooperation with Turkey very positively.<sup>38</sup>

### The Russian navy – China

The Russians view the Chinese as a strategic partner in maintaining global stability (at least in theory).<sup>39</sup> The interface between Russia and China continued to develop during the past year, including the Chinese navy. There were several visits,<sup>40</sup> exercises and maneuvers, the most prominent of which was "Vostok (East) 2018" that was

35 Rettig, Elay. "Russian's Interests in Israel's Natural Gas discoveries". Conference held in June 2018 at The University of Haifa, HMS – Haifa Research Center for Maritime Policy and Strategy.

36 The Sputnik site in Russian, from November 20, 2018. <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/columnists/20181120/243048839/Gaz-na-raspute-kuda-poydet-rossiyskoe-goluboe-toplivo.htm>.

37 [tass.com/world/1029351](http://tass.com/world/1029351) from November 6, 2018.

38 <http://tass.com/politics/1029920> from November 8, 2018.

39 Thomas, T.L. (2017) *Kremlin Control, Russia's Political Military Reality*. Kansas, Fort Leavenworth Foreign Military Studies Office. p. 66.

40 The most recent included the flagship of the Pacific fleet, a destroyer and an auxiliary ship in the Chinese Port of Qingdao during October 23-25 2018 <http://tass.com/defense/1027291>.

held in the Far East in mid-September. It was claimed to be the largest ever carried out and included a force from the Chinese army.<sup>41</sup> The maritime element consisted of dozens of Russian vessels, of which about 20 carried missiles. The maneuver took place in the Sea of Okhotsk (a coast in where the first Russian settlement in the Far East was established).<sup>42</sup> It is worth mentioning that the two countries have an interest in common, i.e. promoting their status as maritime superpowers. One result refers to the devoting efforts for the development of their navies. For Russia, this is a part of the aforementioned maritime strategy for 2030, while for China, the formulation appears in the 18th and 19th Chinese National Congress of the Communist Party, President Xi declared his intention that China shall become a “strong maritime nation.”<sup>43</sup> The maritime interests for both these countries can serve as a common denominator and one of the main expressions of their Russian-Chinese strategic partnership, as both are seeking to develop.

One of the main symbolic implications of this strategic partnership is the Chinese presence in the two most recent Russian annual exercises: Zapad 2017 in the Baltic Sea, which included the presence of Chinese vessels and can be attributed to a Chinese expression of solidarity and loyalty to Russia;<sup>44</sup> and the Vostok 2018 maneuver which took place in the Far East in September and in which the Chinese army took part for the first time, apparently without a clear enough share of its naval units. A participation that expresses Russian-Chinese operational strategic cooperation, as was declared by the Chinese defense minister.<sup>45</sup> Russian Minister of Defense Shoygu stated in late October 2018 that “the close relations between the two nations are at their historical peak.”<sup>46</sup> The Chinese participation in Vostok 2018 strengthened even further the military dimension of Russian-Chinese cooperation. The Chinese took the opportunity to view from closeup the revised Russian combat approach which was implemented during the maneuver. These warfare lessons were learned by Russia as a result of the participation in recent fighting in the Crimea and primarily in Syria. The revised approach mainly provides field officers with greater freedom of action, combined with exposition towards new air and sea offensive

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41 <https://iz.ru/782349/aleksei-ramm-aleksei-kozachenko-kirill-gulov-elnar-bainazarov/morskoi-shchit-dlia-sirii>:

42 <http://tass.com/defense/1021559>

43 [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/Blue\\_China\\_Navigating\\_the\\_Maritime\\_Silk\\_Road\\_to\\_Europe.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/Blue_China_Navigating_the_Maritime_Silk_Road_to_Europe.pdf)

44 Ibid. pp. 30-31.

45 <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com> Analysis by Michael Kofman September 25, 2018.

46 <http://tass.com/defense/1026819>



tactics, which emphasize speed and surprise of the enemy, synchronized with a variety of weapons systems.<sup>47</sup>

Other Commercial/civilian dimension continued to develop during the past year, some of them with regard to the Northern Passage, also referred by the Russians - as the “Russian Suez Canal” (see following section).<sup>48</sup> The Chinese have called this project the “Ice Silk Road”, although this initiative still is in early stages of assessment by China.<sup>49</sup> Project's aim is to create a passage for ships north of the Asian continent, in the Arctic Ocean, and is expected to become feasible as a result of global warming and the partial melting of the northern ice cap. Experts believe that in coming years a month will be added to the current summer of 3 months season, and in the longer run—around the year 2040—a major melting of the ice on the route would free most of this path.<sup>50</sup> Already now the Russians are looking at the possibility to establish a passage for ships on this route, which will involve the use of icebreakers.<sup>51</sup> The main implication of this project could allow a potential saving of about 35 percent of the current costs, compared to the use of the traditional route from China to Europe through the traditional Suez Canal. The trip through the Northern Passage from China to Europe would take only about two weeks and will avoid also passage fees to the Suez Canal and Egyptian authorities (a grossly passage per one bound for a large ship size is estimated at about a half million dollars). There will also be a saving of fuel which price is expected to rise by the end of 2019 (due to IMO regulation to prohibit the use of highly polluting fuel<sup>52</sup>). Russia would like to claim sovereignty in the northern region and over the passage, primarily in view of the profits it can produce. Russia has also included the potential exploitation of the Northern Passage as one of its natural resources. This area (as Atlantic Ocean region that includes Black Sea fleet which operates in Mediterranean) has been declared by Putin in

47 [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_russian\\_manoeuvres\\_with\\_chinese\\_characteristics](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_russian_manoeuvres_with_chinese_characteristics) September 25, 2018.

48 [https://russian.rt.com/world/news/552945-rossiya-sueckii-kanal?utm\\_source=smi2](https://russian.rt.com/world/news/552945-rossiya-sueckii-kanal?utm_source=smi2)

49 See footnote 43, p. 3.

50 <https://newstrend24.ru/v-mire/2171-cepnyaya-reakciya-iz-za-sevmorputi-rf-v-ssha-ozabocheny-rekordami-v-arjolly> | <http://tass.com/economy/1030485> November 12, 2018.

51 <https://newstrend24.ru/v-mire/1147-strahi-finnov-po-sevmorputi-zapadu-grozit-ne-tolko-rossiya.htm>

52 PORT2PORT November 2018, Volume 925. Tel Aviv, p. 14.

the document which defines the Russian navy's missions up to 2030 as an area of preference among the naval priority activities.<sup>53</sup>

Global and regional implications for such implementations of using the "Russian Suez Canal" in the Middle East are still been assessed, as by Russia, too. The Chinese who are expected to be main beneficiaries of the initiative, are also assessed as key investment partners of it. They will have to consider and decide whether they indeed support this initiative as it requires coordination with Russia as a *modus operandi* between both countries. Thus, the Chinese will need to decide on the equation: how much to develop this new project, even as a side-lobe of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), or how much to rely on the existing BRI see – connection between China Sea – Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and finally via Suez Canal into the Mediterranean and Europe). China has highly invested in the current BRI initiative, which considered as one of the key national infrastructure projects. This initiative and other possible investments concerned the northern sea resources are likely to be discussed in the First Russian-Chinese Business Energy Forum (held on November 29, 2018 in Beijing by China's President). President Xi stated that energy is a one component among the joint bi-lateral projects are being developed and has reflections on the strategic interaction between them.<sup>54</sup>

### **The Russian Navy – NATO**

The reduced presence of the US and western navies has contributed to the growing Russian hegemony in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Russians have closed large areas of the Eastern Mediterranean in number of occasions during last year and particularly in September. It appears it has to do with the presence of the western allies: either its thinness, or the opposite, namely the continued Russian fear of the West's intervention along Russia's borders and in Russian waters. This fear has been manifested at sea by the activities taken place west off the Syrian coast and in the region of Kerch strait to the Azov Sea, as described above. Russian fear is based also on the Western development of options that could be employed in the region in a time of a crisis or a need. A such was the deployment of the task force in the region as the Truman aircraft carrier returned to the region in late November 2018 (for an undetermined period), the launch of missiles from sea platforms; and

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53 The site of the Kremlin: document 55127 signed by President Putin – "Fundamental of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations Until 2030", paragraph 24, subparagraph a and f, and paragraph 27c and 27a.

54 <https://nation-news.ru/416075-si-czinpin-zayavil-o>

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the deployment of stealth aircraft (F-35 or unmanned aircraft). It appears that the Russians and their allies are being careful not to violate this equation. Although the French frigate was claimed by Russia to become involved in the downing of the 'Ilyushin 20' in September. it appears that nonetheless the value of the coordination mechanism between Russia and the West—including Israel—will continue to be needed - maintained, and perhaps even upgraded. Israel may even have a key role to play in it. This may become clear following the renewal of the conflict in the Crimea in late November 2018, which President Trump viewed as an act of aggression. The Congressional Committee that examined the US National Defense Strategy for 2018 concluded that “Russia and China are challenging the U.S., its allies and its partners on a far greater scale than has any adversary since the Cold War’s end.” The Crimea incident is liable to provide China with inspiration on how it should proceed in the South China Sea and illustrates the Congressional Committee’s conclusion.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

Russia’s control of the Eastern Mediterranean theater and in particular its maritime components has tightened during the past year and particularly after the downing of the 'Ilyushin 20' airplane in Syria in September 2018. Recall that maritime presence in the region has historically been a Russian interest. Also, today, maritime presence continues to constitute a fundamental Russian interest in the region. Evidence to this is the intention to maintain this situation for decades to come, as part of the leasing agreement between Russia and Syria. Although the buildup is still taking shape, the process is aligned with the policy adopted by Russian in recent years (the annexation of the Crimea in 2014 and the participation in the fighting in Syria since 2015). This can be viewed as part of an intentional Russian strategy, which is seeking to position Russia as the number two naval power in the world (after the US). Russia is seeking to increase its presence and influence globally and not just in our region.

The implications of this process for our region are not yet fully clear, primarily in view of the continued fighting in Syria. The Russians themselves are still studying these implications, as are other players in the region. The timing, conditions and characteristics of an end state to the fighting in Syria are still unclear.<sup>56</sup> It appears that also the renewal of the conflict in the Crimea between Russia and Ukraine in late

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55 From an article generously provided by Dr. Seth Cropsey of the Hudson Institute in Washington. [www.axios.com/authors/SethCropsey](http://www.axios.com/authors/SethCropsey)

56 The time allotted to Turkey at the Sochi Conference (on September 17, 2018) for the demilitarization of the Idlib region ended on October 15<sup>th</sup>, but was extended indefinitely in the meanwhile. <http://tass.com/politics/1026509>

November 2018 following the confrontation between vessels of the two countries indicates that the dispute will continue into 2019 and beyond. It focuses on the dispute about the control of a free international passage of ships through the Strait of Kerch and the traffic in the Sea of Azov and its ports. The implications of the conflict for Ukraine and the rest of the countries involved are still unclear, since the crisis is still in its early days.

The Russian side will have to examine the economic implications of all these involvements, due to the cost of such efforts. Furthermore, the movement of forces, including ships and other naval units, to our region from other naval theaters of operation will require the investment of resources. Aside the price of these activities, there is also a potential economic, operational and political benefit to Russia, particularly from its involvement in Syria. The political profit stems primarily from its renewed superpower status. The expansion of Russia's global influence also influences Putin's domestic status. From an operational-maritime perspective, Russia's activity makes it possible for naval personnel to acquire operational experience, including the use of various weapons system, improvement and developments - as products that can be exported.

It is possible to conclude that the wider maritime implications in the areas of shipping, the economy and commerce will be exploited by Russia, in view of the potential profit that can be gained. This dimension is also attributed to the northern sea and its natural resources, including the exploitation of the Northern Passage within the near future, by means of icebreakers exclusively produced by Russia. However, this initiative will apparently also be influenced by the Chinese willingness to become involved in it.

### **Recommendations for the East Med Arena**

In view of Russia's continued buildup of power in the region, Israel must consider how it can produce benefits from the situation. In the first stage and as a lesson from the events of September 2018 and their ramifications, it is important to rehabilitate relations with Russia with respect to Israel's activity in Syria and Lebanon. In addition, Russia's overall strategy with regard to strengthening its hold in the Eastern Mediterranean is also based on the relations and alliances that Russia establishes. (At the same time, there are relationships with most of the players and simultaneously the relations with each player has a few interfaces ) It is recommended that Israel consider taking advantage of these mutual relations—on the military, economic or civilian aspects—and to integrate within them. Advantage is to exploit its influential

geographic location, internal demographic diversity and the juncture of connections that enable the possibility to influence also the -foreign policy domain. This provides Israeli with the potential to serve as a significant counterweight against Russia in view of the equation of alliances and interests that Russia is currently establishing in the region and at least against key players like Iran, as well as Turkey, Egypt, Syria, also even Lebanon. As a first step, it is important to attempt to rehabilitate relations as possible to the level they were at prior to last September, before the lost of Russian 'Ilyushin 20' airplane.

Russia's expansionary strategy, which includes control of the Syrian coast at the Port of Tartus and the Khmeimim airport, will allow the Russian navy to implement its current operating doctrine with greater momentum in the Middle East. Its goal is primarily to achieve dominance of power and control in a given cell of territory in order to prevent the counter-part from operating in the air or at sea within it, namely the maritime operating doctrine known as A2/Ad (Anti-Access / Anti-Denial). Region's Russian buildup is not yet completed, as still is needed to divide Russian efforts in the maritime domain - between their focus of activity in the Crimean Peninsula as well as the deployment on the Syrian coast. Syria has become even more important in recent months, since the events of September 2018 in Irbil and the downing of the Russian plane within its crew over the Mediterranean. These events have provided additional proof of the necessity for a forward position in the naval base at Tartus and a permanent deployment of vessels and aircrafts there and at Khmeimim, first for the purpose of search and rescue missions, then participation in other naval and ground missions, or for some foreign policy or military tasks. In addition to the reinforcement of naval and aerial platforms, the incident in which a Russian plane was downed led to the decision to also reinforce the coastal presence, as deployment of systems for detection, defense, hybrid warfare, intelligence-gathering and cyber. The same goes for the Russian S-300 air defense systems which were apparently delivered to the Syrians, aside to those designated for the exclusive use by the Russians.

Moreover, in view of the cooperation and information sharing between the Russians and most of the players in the arena, it is worthwhile that account be taken of the exchange of information between them and the formalization of military and civilian cooperation (e.g. maritime domain, gas and oil rigs). The implications for Iran, Hezbollah and perhaps even Hamas (even if indirectly) will be attributed primarily to the Syrian front which has until now been the main area of operations. Things could spread over additional areas such as Lebanon and even Gaza, either as a response to UN and EU initiatives there, as Russian aspiration to have influence

there – too. Another expected regional influence in the maritime domain involves Turkey, Egypt and also the neighboring countries, as well as more distant countries on the North African coast. With regard to the superpowers, consideration should be given to the partnership with China and perhaps even the sharing of information with it. The development of the Russian arsenal may also involve cooperation with China and will provide additional reinforcement to the Russian buildup in the region. In any case, maintaining the maritime status quo, including this use of detection and intelligence-gathering systems, will continue and will be expanded, including that based on non-military sources.

The buildup of the Russian navy in the domain, including tighter cooperation between Russia and its partners, will apparently also affect the joint effort to prevent access to the Western navies, and particularly the USN and Israeli navy in the East Med. This is also based upon the improvement in Russia's military arsenal and in particular its maritime arsenal. It appears that the territory that will be restricted to the Israeli navy, even if only partially, in order to hinder its operations, will be the maritime zone west of the Syrian coast. This will affect the Israeli naval variety operational possibilities, with emphasis on clandestine and low signature activity. The Israeli navy will have to integrate systems and methods to overcome the aforementioned constraints on its operational activities.

On the other hand, it is worthwhile considering the strengthening of the Israeli navy's explicit presence and the demarcation of its boundaries of operations accordingly, as part of missions to “show the flag” and to maintain sovereignty and influence. It is worthwhile developing a variety of activities, some on the civilian and international levels, within this context. This is related to an additional component, namely the US navy and in particular its reduced presence in the arena, in shaping the configuration of forces and the rules of the game in this region.

It is recommended that the Israeli navy also maintain the mechanism for cooperation with Russia. However, this will require extra caution in order to avoid an error that would threaten Russian sovereignty, as occurred in the downing of the 'Ilyushin 20' airplane in September 2018.

Another element that may emerge as a result of the mutual coordination and the focus on the common concerns involves threats from Iran and Hezbollah which have the ability to utilize naval weaponry. Although these are primarily directed toward Israel, the nature of the threat and in particular its asymmetric components—which are meant to disrupt advanced weapons systems—will require Russians to take an

interest and to monitor the situation, also because of the limited ability to control these systems at every given moment. Although the risk of the realization of these threats against Russia, or assets under its sovereignty in the maritime domain has a low likelihood. The possibility exists of this threat being realized indirectly against Russia, whether due to a loss of control or negligence or even unintentionally, as occurred in the ' Ilyushin 20' event. . The risk to Russia of such an extreme scenario will require it to adopt extra caution and to monitor the situation. Here again there is an opportunity for Israel to establish cooperation. Russia will in the future apparently be more careful about maintaining control over the operation of Russian-made weapons systems, such as the S-300, including those that various players in the arena may wish to deploy.

In addition, it is recommended to invest in considerations and in mapping the potential opportunities for Israel, which are likely to arise as a result of the implementation of Russia's maritime strategy, as well as the presence of the Russian navy in the arena. These developments will be in addition to the expected benefits from Russia's relations with the abovementioned "third parties" and are likely to be beneficial in the various dimensions: political, economic-commercial, military, etc.

In conclusion, the presence of the Russian navy in the Syrian domain will only get stronger and is not expected to diminish (unlike the expectation for other arms of the Russian military). Also, within the context of civilian shipping, the activity of the shipping lines between the two countries, with emphasis on the ports of Sebastopol and Tartus, will also open up as part of the rehabilitation process in Syria. On the basis of Russian cooperation with other regional players, as mentioned, it can be assumed that there will be an increase in the presence of the Russian navy also in other areas within the maritime domain of the Eastern Mediterranean.