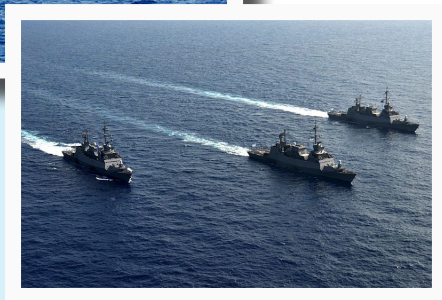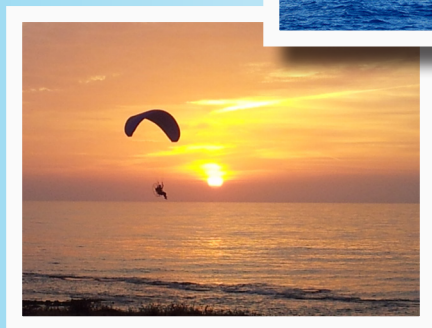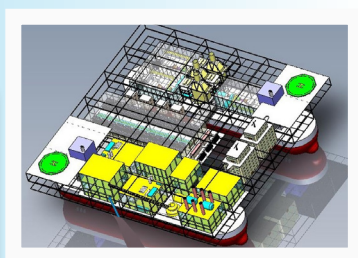# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2016

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Chapter 5: The Russian Navy's Strategy in the Mediterranean Sea – Current Operations in Historical Perspective

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General

Vladimir Putin's long-term strategy, based on the desire to restore Russia's image and status as a superpower – a policy unofficially dubbed "Russia rising from its knees" – has also influenced the Russian government's activities regarding maritime policy in general, and Russian policy on naval operations in particular.

Since the most recent wave of reforms in the Russian armed forces in 2009 (in practice these are not reforms but rather an attempt to rebuild the armed forces), the Russian leadership has attempted to demonstrate that the Russian Navy is regaining its greatness and is capable of carrying out missions befitting the navy of a superpower. One aspect of this is that the Russian leadership aspires to expand the navy's operations beyond the maritime regions adjacent to its coasts. In this context, those responsible for defense issues in Russia like quoting Tsar Alexander III's well-known saying: "Russia has only two allies – its army and its navy."

In July 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved Russia's new maritime doctrine. This doctrine designated five operational arenas of the Russian Navy: the Atlantic arena, the Arctic arena, the Pacific arena, the Caspian Sea arena, and the Indian Ocean arena. The Arctic and Atlantic arenas received the highest priority, including a decision that one of Russia's main maritime objectives would be to restore a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea, which is considered part of the Atlantic arena.[1] In order to understand the thinking of Russia's political and military leadership on navy operations, we can quote the current commander of the Russian Navy, Admiral Vladimir Korolev, who said in an interview that "the navy of the country with the longest maritime borders in the world cannot afford to be weak."[2]

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1   The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation, published on the official website of the President of Russia, www.kremlin.ru. It should be noted, nonetheless, that the decision in principle to renew the navy's presence in the Mediterranean was made a few years prior, and its implementation began in January 2013, with the navy exercise held in this arena.

2   Our Navy's Strength Is in its Heritage: interview with the Naval Commander Admiral Vladimir Korolev," The Newspaper of Russia, July 31, 2016. From: https://rg.ru/2016/07/31/glavnokomanduiushchij–vmf–flot–rossii–ne–mozhet–pozvolit–sebe–byt–slabym.html

Historical background

The current Russian leadership likes to make reference to the longstanding heritage of the Russian Navy and Russian maritime activities. However, in actuality, for the first few centuries of its existence Russia was a land-based country and the Russian Navy was established at a relatively late stage. Russia's impressive territorial expansion throughout history was also mainly over land. The Russian Navy was only established at the end of the 17th century, when Peter the Great first raised the idea of Russia becoming a maritime power. The first stage in carrying out this objective was the attempts to take over the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea and the northern coast of the Black Sea. This policy led, naturally, to wars with Sweden and with the Ottoman Empire, which ruled at that time and forced Peter to begin building up the navy.

At the beginning, Russian military efforts – including naval efforts – focused mainly on the Baltic Sea, but within a relatively short time, the center of gravity moved to the Black Sea, and from the second quarter of the 18th century to the end of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire was Russia's main adversary.

By the end of the 18th century, Russia's objective was to take over the northern coast of the Black Sea, and afterwards to expand Russia's territory in the region and ensure the free passage of Russian ships – both commercial and military – from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Russia's conception of its "historic right" to territories in the Black Sea region, including the Crimean Peninsula, developed during these wars, and was joined by the religious perspective that considered these wars a struggle against "heathens." Admiral Fyodor Ushakov, for example, a prominent commander of the Russian Navy in a part of the wars against the Ottomans in the 18th century, was proclaimed a saint by the Eastern Orthodox Church.

In the mid-19th century, Russia, in light of the "Eastern Question,"[3] began to grant more importance to the Mediterranean arena (especially the Eastern Mediterranean). The increasing involvement in this issue led to one of the greatest disasters in the history of the Russian military in general, and its navy in particular – the Crimean War defeat at the hands of the advanced armies of France and Britain.

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3   The set of 19th century international disputes surrounding the status of the holy places in Palestine and the struggle for influence within the territory of the Ottoman Empire.

Russia not only lost its Black Sea Fleet, it was also forbidden from maintaining naval forces in this arena.[4]

Throughout its history, the Russian Navy remained merely a secondary support in Russian military campaigns. The navy did not play an independent or leading part in any war, and the bulk of its operations amounted to defending the coasts and supporting the ground forces. This continued to be the case in World War II, during which the navy did not carry out any independent missions. An attempt to go beyond this limited role was only made in the 1960s, when then-commander of the Soviet Navy, Admiral Sergey Gorshkov, initiated the transformation of the navy into a strategic armed force, and began an ambitious program to create a navy capable of operating throughout the oceans. He even succeeded in changing the way naval operations were perceived, and promoting the doctrine of the navy's permanent presence at key points around the world. As part of implementing this doctrine, a number of "operational squadrons" were established and stationed in distant maritime arenas. The first of them, the Fifth Operational Squadron, operated in the Mediterranean.

These changes resulted mainly from the Cold War rivalry with the U.S., and were part of attempts to offset American military power. The Soviet leadership during the Nikita Khrushchev period (1953-1964) placed a clear priority on developing the strategic nuclear component of the armed forces, in effect neglecting the conventional component. One of the main reasons for Gorshkov's success was his ability to convince the leadership that the naval forces could be an important component of Soviet strategic nuclear power. As a result, a clear priority was placed on building up the submarine force.

In addition, demonstrating naval power was seen by Gorshkov and his associates as an essential "status symbol" for a superpower. According to a number of accounts, in every discussion, Gorshkov demanded to hear "how the Americans solve problems similar to those being discussed."[5] Admiral Nikolay Amelko, who during the 1970s served as deputy commander of the navy for anti-submarine

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4   Officially, the agreement spoke of the neutralization of the Black Sea. This clause applied to both Russia and the Ottoman Empire. In practice, the Ottomans could maintain battleships and navy infrastructure in the Marmara Sea and in the eastern part of the Mediterranean, while Russia did not have the ability to quickly move marine forces from another arena. The text of the agreement, according to the Moscow University Faculty of History website: http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/FOREIGN/paris.htm.

5   Манойлин, В.И. Базирование Военно–морского флота СССР – Manoylin, V.I., *Bazirovanie Voenno–morskogo flota SSSR (The deployment of the Navy of the USSR)*, (Petersburg, Нева, 2004), p. 286.

warfare, defined Gorshkov's doctrine as: "If the Americans have it, then we also need to have it."[6]

Considering the fact that the Soviet leadership never put its navy into action as a power lever in regional conflicts, and made do with "flag-waving" vis-à-vis the Americans, we can assume that in practice, the doctrine and the operation of the Soviet fleet was based on the principle of a "fleet in being," whose main purpose is to challenge the adversary's fleet through the very existence of a powerful fleet.[7]

These operations were a considerable part of the increase in the Soviet Union's defense budget, which was one of the main reasons for the collapse of the Soviet economy in the second half of the 1980s. As a result, even before the fall of the Soviet Union, a significant decrease in the operations of the Soviet fleet began. After the Soviet Union ceased to exist, most of the Soviet fleet became Russia's fleet, and its budget was cut (along with the funding of the armed forces in general) to the absolute minimum, due to the severe economic crisis that plagued Russia.

This remained the case during the first few years of Putin's rule. At the beginning of his first term, Putin took a step seen by many in Russia as the destruction of one of the last remnants of the "glory age" of Soviet military power, when in 2001 he decided for economic reasons to close the Lourdes electronic intelligence collection center in Cuba and the Russian fleet's facility in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam.[8] However, this decision did not apply to another Russian facility – the Tartus base in Syria (which Russia retained even after ending the permanent presence of its naval forces in distant arenas).

Russia's doctrine changed completely in 2004. The stated reason for this was the terrorist attack in the city of Beslan in the North Caucasus. In an address to the nation after the attack, Putin presented a new paradigm, in which he defined the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century," and declared that "we showed weakness – and those who are weak get hit."[9]

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6   Амелько, Н.Н. В интересах флота и государства: Воспоминания адмирала – Amelko, N.N. *V interesakh flota i gosudarstva: Vospominaniya admirala (In Accordance to the Interests of the Navy and of the State: The Memoires of the Admiral)*, (Moscow, Наука, 2003), p. 129.

7   Y. Harkabi *War and Strategy*, Tel Aviv, Maarachot, 1990, p. 176.

8   Дешевле Лурдеса, надёжнее Камрани" ("Deshevle Lurdesa, nadezhnee Kamrani",) in: Kommersant–Vlast, Oct. 30, 2001.

9   https://lenta.ru/russia/2004/09/04/putin/

The Russian fleet's main problems

Since the inception of the Russian fleet over 300 year ago, several basic geopolitical traits have hampered its development and prevented Russia from fully developing naval capabilities like other superpowers.

The first problem is the "land-based" tradition of Russian expansion. In contrast to other naval powers such as Britain, Spain or Portugal, at the beginning Russia did not border on countries with comparable military capabilities, thus nothing prevented Russia from expanding over land. The land strategy was preserved even when Russia faced stronger adversaries such as Sweden and the Ottoman Empire. These geopolitical traits of Russian expansion since its formation as a state in the 15th century have led to its naval fleet having a secondary role in the Russian military.

The development of Russia's naval power was also influenced by geographic conditions. The Russian fleet operates in a number of separate arenas (the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the North Sea, the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean), and the connection between the different arenas, as well as their connection to the Oceanic arenas, is limited. Exiting the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea require passing through straits which are not under Russian control. Passage from the Arctic Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean involved passing through areas controlled in practice by other countries, while the main bases in the Pacific Ocean are separated from the open ocean by the Kuril Islands and Japan.

The very fact that the maritime arenas are separated from one another has also influenced the capabilities of the Soviet fleet, and later also the capabilities of the Russian fleet, to move forces from one arena to another. The most prominent example of this is the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, during which the Russians were forced, after the fleet's defeat in the Pacific Ocean, to send a flotilla from the Baltic Sea as reinforcements. The flotilla sailed through the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean without stopping along the way.

Russia's current naval strategy in the Mediterranean arena

Since Russia began rebuilding its armed forces in the previous decade, the country's leadership has seen naval operations as a means of demonstrating the restoration of Russia's military power and of Russia's international status as a world superpower.

At first, these operations had four primary aspects:

1. Renewal of sea patrols in the northern Atlantic, which was a traditional arena of activity of the Northern Fleet.

2. Improved military capability in the Arctic – from the political leadership's perspective, increased presence in the area is one of the main features of restoring Russian power. An inseparable part of this is developing military infrastructure and expanding military activity in general, and naval operations in particular, in this area. The official explanation for this is the need to protect Russian positions in the Arctic given increased international competition for natural resources in the region. It is noteworthy that an unmanned Russian submarine symbolically placed the Russian flag on the sea floor in the North Pole area in 2007.

3. Participation in international operations against piracy near the Somali coast: Russia began operating against pirates in the western Indian Ocean alongside an international force as early as 2009 because its commercial vessels were among those attacked and also because it saw the operation as one of the most important international naval operations.

4. Renewal of the fleet's operations in the Pacific Ocean. The main aspect of this was the development of cooperation with the Chinese navy, including joint exercises that the naval forces participated in, including Russian Marine units.

Only later did the Mediterranean come into view. Although the Russian fleet conducted isolated operations in the Mediterranean even during Russia's most difficult period in the 1990s, significant signs of Russia's return to this arena only appeared in 2007, when Russia's only aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov sailed from its home port in Severomorsk on the Barents Sea to the Mediterranean. As mentioned above, the decision to renew a permanent presence in the arena was only made later, in 2010.

Russia's defense doctrine in the post-Soviet era is characterized by Russia not directly discussing the possibility of outright war, but rather addressing threats to Russian interests, areas of influence, or allies. This is also apparent in its current military doctrine, approved in December 2014 during the height of the Ukraine crisis and after Russia's invasion of the Crimea, which led to the most significant tensions in Russia's relationship with the West since the end of the Cold War. However, at the top of the list of threats is increased NATO military potential,

NATO's progress towards Russia's borders, and the deployment of foreign military forces in countries bordering Russia or its allies.[10]

Russia's naval doctrine also mentions the NATO alliance as a threat (through not a direct military threat). According to this doctrine, "the decisive factor in NATO relations is the fact that the progress of the alliance's military infrastructure towards Russian borders, and allowing the alliance to have a global role, remain unacceptable to the Russian Federation.[11]

In practice, the need to renew the Russian fleet's permanent presence in the Mediterranean stems directly from this doctrine, primarily because of the presence of the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, which, with the decreased U.S. presence in Europe and the European countries' military cutbacks after the end of the Cold War, remains NATO's strongest force, and that stationed closest to Russia's borders.

Since the Russian fleet's return to the Mediterranean, there has been a clear preference for highly visible actions in the arena, such as exercises and flag-waving. This supports the assumption that these actions are in accordance with the "fleet in being" principle, and are primarily a demonstration of the Russian fleet's permanent (or relatively permanent) presence in the arena, even if the extent of the forces is significantly smaller than that operated by the Soviet Union in the arena some 25 years earlier. In September 2013, two years after the approval of the current naval doctrine, the Russian Forces in the Mediterranean Command was reestablished, and ships sent from other arenas, including the Pacific Fleet, became subject to it.[12]

Under these conditions, the Russian naval base at Tartus has regained importance.[13] With the permanent presence of Russian ships in the Mediterranean Sea, the Tartus Port serves as their main port. This is especially significant considering that ships from Russia's Northern Fleet have been sent to the Mediterranean (for example, the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier).

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10   The Russian Federation's Military Doctrine (2014), Section 12, from the official page of the Russian President: http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf

11   The Russian Federation's Naval Doctrine, from the official page of the Russian President www.kremlin.ru

12   Official website of the Russian Ministry of Defense, http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12096837@egNews#txt

13   Sometimes the Tartus facility is considered a naval base, but in fact, according to the official definition as well as in reality, the Tartus facility is not a true naval base but rather only a "maintenance and supply point."

A new stage of operation for the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean and the region began in September 2015 when Russian forces were sent to Syria to support the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Though the majority of Russian operations in Syria are conducted by the air force, the Russian fleet has two important tasks in the operation: responsibility for transporting forces to the combat zone and responsibility for transporting supplies from various ports in the Black Sea (an operation unofficially dubbed the "Syrian Express" in Russia). In addition, the Russian Marines, which are part of the fleet's forces, are responsible for ground security of the bases where Russian air force squadrons are stationed.

At the start of the operation, the naval forces had a very limited role. The ships in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea were tasked primarily with logistical support for the Russian forces in Syria. According to Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu at a meeting of the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Defense on September 21, 2016, there were at least six warships and 3-4 support ships permanently stationed in the Mediterranean at that point, belonging to each of Russia's four fleets.[14]

However, over the last year, Russia's use of naval forces in Syria has increased. Russian warships have repeatedly fired cruise missiles at targets in Syria. The missiles have been fired by both Black Sea Fleet ships currently in the Mediterranean and relatively close to the targets, as well as by Caspian Sea Flotilla ships. Meanwhile, TU-22M strategic bombers (designated Backfire by NATO), stationed in Russia itself, have been used to attack targets in Syria by air. In addition, a decision was made to send the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov to join the ships in the Mediterranean,[15] and it crossed the English Channel on its way to the Mediterranean Sea in October 2016.

Because the effectiveness of using cruise missiles against Syrian rebel targets and the operational need for long-distance cruise missiles and strategic bombers are unclear, the main reason for using these weapons was presumably to demonstrate Russia's ability to conduct this type of attack, and to signal to the international community – or at least to create the impression – that Russian capabilities are equal to those of the United States.

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14 Report on the official website of the Russian Ministry of Defense, http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12096723@egNews

15 Report on the official website of the Russian Ministry of Defense, http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12096723@egNews

Conclusion

In 2016, an important part of Russia's military operations in general, and in the Mediterranean arena in particular, was demonstrating its naval power. However, the role of the naval forces, including those stationed in the Mediterranean, remains being a "fleet in being."

As for the role of the naval forces in operations, their role continues to be what it was throughout the history of the Russian fleet. The naval forces fulfill a support role, even though today the combat is in a distant combat zone with no direct access to Russian territory, and is therefore a challenging arena from an operational and logistical perspective.