An Offensive Realist Account of Russia's Foreign Policy in the Black Sea Region

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Abstract

From the Tsarist epoch to the Soviet period and then since the establishment of the Russian Federation, the Black Sea has been evaluated as a region of substantial importance for Russian national interests from the viewpoint of the Russian foreign policy makers. The incumbent Russian President Vladimir Putin in the early years of his stint, in September 2003 had described the Azov-Black Sea basin as a zone of Russian strategic interests due to its access to warm sea, its maritime links to Europe and its proximity to the Northern Caucasus where Russia was fighting against separate currents that were detrimental to its territorial integrity. In accordance with this general outlook, Russia has been pursuing an active and assertive foreign policy line in the Black Sea region since the mid-2000s which did not hesitate to resort to military instruments if vital interests were perceived to be at stake. Borrowing from the main premises of the offensive realist theory that was put forth by John Mearsheimer, this paper claims that Russia, as a great power, seeks to establish a regional hegemony in the Black Sea by beating off its rivals, specifically the NATO and the EU and utilizes various political, economic and military tools to attain this goal. The study while trying to analyze the main contours of this multi-faceted foreign policy, will also aim to assess the extent of its success in the light of recent developments in the region.

Keywords: Black Sea, Russia, post-Cold War period, regional hegemony, offensive realism

Özet

Karadeniz, Çarlık devrinden Sovyet dönemine daha sonra da Rusya Federasyonu'nun kuruluşundan günümüze kadar geçen süre boyunca Rus dış politika yapıcıları tarafından Rus ulusal çıkarları açısından büyük öneme sahip bir bölge olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Mevcut cumhurbaşkanı Vladimir Putin görevinin ilk yıllarında, Eylül 2003'te, sıcak denizlere erişimi, Avrupa ile denizcilik bağlantıları ve Rusya'nın toprak bütünlüğüne zararlı ayrılıkçı akımlarla mücadele ettiği Kuzey Kafkasya'ya yakınlığı nedeniyle Azak-Karadeniz havzasını Rus stratejik çıkar bölgesi olarak tanımlamıştı. Bu genel görüş uyarınca Rusya Karadeniz bölgesinde 2000'li yılların ortalarından itibaren hayati çıkarlarının tehlike altında olduğunu hissettiğinde askeri enstrümanlara başvurmaktan kaçınmadığı aktif ve iddialı bir dış politika çizgisi izlemektedir. Bu bildiri John Mearsheimer tarafından ortaya konulan saldırgan realist teorinin temel varsayımlarını ödünç alarak Rusya'nın büyük bir güç olarak olarak rakiplerini özellikle NATO ve AB'yi bertaraf ederek Karadeniz'de bölgesel bir hegemonya kurmaya çabaladığını ve bu hedefe ulaşmak için muhtelif siyasi, ekonomik ve askeri araçlardan yararlandığını iddia etmektedir. Çalışma bu çok yönlü dış politikanın ana hatlarını analiz etmeye çalışırken başarısının boyutlarını da bölgedeki son gelişmeler ışığında değerlendirmeyi hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Karadeniz, Rusya, Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönem, bölgesel hegemonya, saldırgan realizm

Introduction

The end of the Cold War and disappearance of the bipolar rivalry did not much change the main contours of the international system we are living in. Ours is still an anarchic world devoid of any overarching central authority that can impose its will upon the states. States still continue to act as the kingpins in world politics despite the increasing and manifold onslaughts of the international organizations, multi-national corporations and transnational actors. Uncertain about other states' nature of intentions toward them, states place great emphasis on survival. They, being rational actors that focus on self-help, try hard to develop strategies which will increase their chances of survival in this tough and competitive international environment.

Drawing on these main assumptions of realism, John Mearsheimer, one of the leading advocates of the realist school, made significant contributions to the theory in 2001 with his book named *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Mearsheimer, in his piece claims that the best way to guarantee security and survival for states in this anarchic international system will be to maximize their relative power vis-à-vis the other states which may lead to some aggressive behavior.[1]

All great powers, which are defined by Mearsheimer as states that possess significant actual and potential capabilities[2] aspire to ascend to the status of hegemon, the most powerful state in the international system which dominates the world, as a best way to protect themselves from the encroachments of other rivals. However, the stopping power of oceans makes it impossible for great powers to achieve this goal and they have to settle for regional hegemony.[3] They concentrate their energies on becoming the dominant power in their own region and preventing other competitors from gaining a foothold in their own backyard. So great powers continuously pursue opportunities to alter the balance of power in their regional neighborhood to their advantage and employ all kinds of political, economic and military means to realize this end even if this kind of activism draws strong reaction and in some cases retaliation from other actors in the region.[4]

This study will utilize Mearsheimer's offensive realist theory in order to examine the foundations of the Russian foreign policy in the Black Sea region. Both actual and latent power indicators demonstrate that Russia is a great power. Moscow ranks among the top five countries in terms of ground forces and active personnel.[5] It retains the highest number of nuclear warheads.[6] With a population of 144 million Russia is the ninth most crowded country of the

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[1] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 21.

[2] Actual capabilities correspond to the military power including the army, navy, air forces and the nuclear deterrent. According to Mearsheimer a great power should be able to fight a conventional war against the most powerful state in the world which assigns significant primacy to the land forces. Land forces also play crucial role in capturing and controlling territory. Potential capabilities on the other hand, are composed of a size of a state's population and its wealth which will be instrumental for generating military might. See ibid., 43 and 60-61.

[3] Ibid., 84.

[4] Ibid., 34.

[5] "Armed Forces Personnel, Total," World Development Indicators, *The World Bank*, last modified October 14, 2016, http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&series=MS.MIL.TOTL.P1&country=#.

[6] Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Status of World Nuclear Forces," *Federation of American Scientists*, last modified May 26, 2016, https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/.

world.[7] It ranks on the sixth place in terms of GDP figures based on purchasing power parity[8] and on the 13th place in terms of GNP.[9]

Russia, as a great power aims to be the regional hegemon in the Black Sea in order to ensure its security against the advances of the EU and NATO which intended to bring the region closer to their orbit. Therefore, since the mid-2000s, concomitant to its growing economic and military capabilities, Moscow has been searching for opportunities in order to expand its zone of influence in the region much to the detriment of lesser powers such as Georgia and Ukraine. This study will look into the various diplomatic, economic and military instruments employed by Russia to accomplish its revisionist goals in the Black Sea and will evaluate to what extent they have been successful up to now.

Russian Attempts to Curb the Western Influence in the Black Sea via Diplomacy

Half of the states that encircle the Black Sea are strictly tied to the Euro-Atlantic political, economic and military structures. Bulgaria and Romania acceded to NATO in 2004 and they were awarded with the EU membership three years later. Turkey has been a member of NATO since the early days of the Cold War and has been conducting accession negotiations with the Union since 2005.

Russia rendered negative opinion regarding the expansion of NATO and EU to the east on the grounds that this would violate the principle of equal security and lead to new dividing lines on the European continent.[10] Furthermore, Russia has been pursuing active diplomacy since the mid-2000s to hinder possible accession of remaining two Black Sea littoral states, namely Georgia and Ukraine to NATO and EU as their integration to the Euro-Atlantic structures will complete Russia's containment in the region by rival military and politico-economic blocs. In line with this reasoning, while the pro-EU and pro-NATO governments in Georgia and Ukraine which vowed to bring their countries closer to the level eligible for membership to these organizations drew sharp criticisms along with punitive measures from Russia, those which spent extra effort to alleviate Russian concerns and sensitivities with regard to these matters managed to have at least a workable relationship with their large neighbor. Georgia, during the decade-long presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili struggled hard to build closer political, economic and security ties with the EU and NATO. As a matter of fact, Saakashvili as early as January 25, 2004, in his inauguration speech had remarked in a strong emphasis that it was time to reinstate Georgia's place in European family and stated that the direction of the country would be towards European integration.[11] Georgia became one of the 16 countries in 2004 that had been incorporated into the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) which aimed to envisage closer political and economic bonds with the states that were located in close proximity to EU's borders. It was also included in the Eastern Partnership initiative of

[7] "Population Ranking," World Development Indicators, *The World Bank*, last modified October 11, 2016, http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/Population-ranking-table.

[8] "GDP Ranking, PPP Based," World Development Indicators, *The World Bank*, last modified October 11, 2016, http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/GDP-PPP-based-table.

[9] "Gross Domestic Product 2015," World Development Indicators, *The World Bank*, last modified October 11, 2016, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD.

[10] See "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*, last modified January 12, 2008, http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116 and "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, last modified February 18, 2013, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186.

[11] "President Saakashvili's Inauguration Speech," *Civil Georgia*, last modified January 25, 2004, http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26694.

the EU in 2009, a spin-off from the ENP which intended to open the way for stronger economic relations and liberalized visa regime between the EU and the Eastern European countries.

The NATO membership turned out to be the other priority target for Georgia as the country speeded up requisite military reforms while continuing to participate to the NATO-led operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan and the Mediterranean.[12] Saakashvili also declared in March 2007 that Georgia would more than double the number of the troops that contributed to the USA's Iraq operation[13] in order to ensure that the most influential actor in NATO would back up the country's bid for membership.

Moscow did not share Tbilisi's euphoria about being part of the American and European led security and politico-economic organizations at all. The change of hands in leadership of Georgia, along with Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan were gauged as well thought and calculated moves from the Western world to undermine Russian influence in its near abroad.[14] Russia decided to bridle pro-Western orientation of Georgia by straining its authority in restive areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia through provision of Russian passports to the residents of these regions. Political ties between the two countries were tensed up following the arrest of four Russian military officers in Georgia in September 2006 on charges of espionage.[15] This resulted in withdrawal of Russian diplomats from Georgia for a while, deportation of Georgian citizens from Russia and severance of transportation links between the two countries.[16] Russian-Georgian political association further went off the rails on September 2, 2008, after Georgia broke off bilateral diplomatic ties in the aftermath of the August 8 War.[17]

The coming to power of a new government in Georgia subsequent to the October 2012 elections which preferred taking a less-confrontational stand vis-à-vis Russia led to the normalization of political relations between Moscow and Tbilisi to some extent. Accusing their predecessors of adopting 'hostile' rhetoric against Russia[18] and waving Georgian NATO membership in front of Moscow's eyes like waving a red cloth in front of a bull[19], the new leaders of Georgia tried hard to mend fences with their intransigent neighbor. Tbilisi appointed a special representative for relations with Russia[20], abolished the visa regime for Russian citizens unilaterally and removed its objection to Moscow's entry to the World Trade

[12] "Relations with Georgia," *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, last modified June 7, 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_38988.htm.
[13] Matthew Collin, "Georgia to Double Troops in Iraq," *BBC News*, 9 March 2007.
[14] "Groups are Spying on Russia, Security Chief Says," *The New York Times*, 13 May 2005.
[15] It should be noted that one of the accusations directed against the Russian officers was obtaining information regarding Georgia's strategies for integration with the NATO. See Diana Petriashvili, "Russia Recalls Ambassador to Georgia, Plans Evacuation," *Eurasia Insight*, 27 September 2006.
[16] Ivars Indans, "Relations of Russia and Georgia: Developments and Future Prospects," *Baltic Security & Defence Review* 9 (2007): 131-132.
[17] "Relations between Georgia and Russia," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia*, accessed November 21, 2016, http://www.mfa.gov.ge/MainNav/ForeignPolicy/BilateralRelations/%E1%83%A0%E1%83%A3%E1%83%A1%E1%83%94%E1%83%97%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A4%E1%83%94%E1%83%93%E1%83%94%E1%83%A0%E1%83%90%E1%83%AA%E1%83%98%E1%83%90.aspx.
[18] Judy Dempsey, "Georgia's NATO, EU, and Russia Challenge," *Carnegie Europe*, 20 June 2016.
[19] Armin Rosen, "The Billionaire Who Would Rule Georgia: An Interview With Ivanishvili," *The Atlantic*, 28 August 2012.
[20] Regis Gente, "Bidzina Ivanishvili, a Man Who Plays According to Russian Rules?" *Caucasus Survey* 1, no. 1 (2013): 124.

Organization (WTO).[21] Russia returned the favor by resuming regular road and air service between the two countries[22] and initiating a simplified visa regime for Georgian citizens.[23] Yet, recovering relations with Moscow did not hold Tbilisi back from signing an association agreement with the EU in June 2014.

The taking office of a pro-Western politician, Viktor Yushchenko in January 2005 as the new President of Ukraine portended the repetition of the Saakashvili case in this Black Sea country to which Russia attached special importance due to historical, strategic, economic and socio-cultural reasons. Shortly after the formation of the new government both the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Defense Minister of Ukraine declared their determination to pursue NATO membership[24]. Similar to Georgia, Ukraine became a partner country within the ENP and the Eastern Partnership. The evident Euro-Atlantic inclination among the Ukrainian leadership coupled with its attempts to bolster Ukrainian nationalism via rehabilitation of controversial historical figures and restriction of Russian language incited reaction from Moscow. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev postponed sending a new Russian ambassador to Ukraine in August 2009 on the grounds that Kiev was pursuing 'anti-Russian' policies.[25]

The assumption of the Ukrainian presidency by Viktor Yanukovych in February 2010[26] induced a change in Russian-Ukrainian relations for the better. Two months after his inauguration as the new President of Ukraine, Yanukovych clinched a deal with Moscow which extended the use of naval facilities in Crimea by the Russian Black Sea Fleet for 25 years.[27] He adopted a negative position towards NATO membership and supported the Russian intervention in Georgia.[28] Moreover, Yanukovych was influential in passing of a new law in the Ukrainian parliament which elevated the status of Russian to a regional language in areas where the Russians made up ten percent of the population.[29] Russia, in turn granted a 30 percent price decrease in the natural gas it sold to Ukraine and postponed the collection of the country's huge debt emanated from previous natural gas purchases.

Yanukovych's decision to put Ukraine's prospective association agreement with the EU on the back burner in November 2013 upon intense pressure from Russia precipitated the

[21] Timur Z. Mansurov, Elena A. Tereshina, Andrey V. Ivanov and Natalia A. Shibanova, "The Process of Normalization of Russian-Georgian Relations: The Limits and Spheres of Interaction between States," *Journal of Organizational Culture, Communications and Conflict* 20, no. 2 (2016): 117.

[22] "Russian-Georgian Relations," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, last modified March 10, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/osobennosti-rossijsko-gruzinskih-otnosenij.

[23] "Comment by the Foreign Ministry on Relaxing Visa Regime for Georgian Citizens," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, last modified December 22, 2015, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1991717.

[24] Andrei Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand: The Sources of Russia's Ukraine Policy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 4 (2015): 282.

[25] Ibid., 283.

[26] Yanukovych was Russia's favorite candidate in Ukraine's presidential election of 2004. Putin sent one of his advisers, Gleb Pavlovsky to lend a hand to his election campaign, Russian media demonstrated a pro-Yanukovych line in their coverage of the event. On top of these, Putin visited Ukraine on the eve of the first and second rounds of elections and repeated once more again his endorsement of Yanukovych. See Taras Kuzio, "Soviet Conspiracy Theories and Political Culture in Ukraine: Understanding Viktor Yanukovych and the Party of Regions," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 44 (2011): 225-226.

[27] "Joint News Conference with President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych," *President of Russia*, last modified April 21, 2010, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/7518.

[28] F. Stephen Larrabee, "Russia, Ukraine, and Central Europe: The Return of Geopolitics," *Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 39.

[29] Tsygankov: 291.

massive protests that led to his downfall in February 2014. Russia had been trying since 2011 to tie Ukraine down to an integration arrangement it had concocted with Belarus and Kazakhstan. A possible EU-Ukrainian trade deal would not only preclude the realization of such a scheme but would also require stricter technical standards and safety requirements on behalf of the Russian goods entering to Ukrainian market[30] and drag the Russian firms in a tough competition they were not quite prepared to take part. Russia's promises of loans and reduction in the natural gas price however, was of little avail to change the tide to its advantage as a couple of months after Yanukovych's fall from grace Ukraine completed the signing of the EU association agreement.

Declarations from higher echelons of the Russian state that warned Georgia and Ukraine pertaining to repercussions of a possible membership to EU and NATO and sporadic suspension of diplomatic ties with these countries were the major political instruments utilized by Moscow to hold its ground in the Black Sea. However, after realizing that diplomatic tools would not suffice to dissuade Tbilisi and Kiev from seeking ways to partake in Euro-Atlantic structures, Moscow decided to put in use both financial inducements as well as commercial coercion to make them change their mind. The next part of the study will delve into the examination of these economic instruments employed by Russia to bring into line perceived unruly states in the Black Sea region.

Russian Efforts to Domineer Black Sea through Economic Means

Russia embraced a three-pronged approach to expand its economic clout in the Black Sea region. First of all, Moscow tried to institutionalize and enhance regional cooperation with the help of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC). Secondly, it initiated a trade war against the Black Sea states with which it had serious political issues by restricting the entry of their goods and services to Russian territory, marking up the price of the natural gas sold to them and constructing alternative natural gas pipelines to bypass their land. Finally, Moscow augmented its impact on the economies of these obdurate Black Sea countries via investments, joint ventures and acquisitions that acted as significant levers on these states in times of political disagreements and crises with Russia.

The BSEC, first post-Cold War regional economic organization established in the Black Sea neighborhood under the initiative of Turkey is the main platform of interaction for Black Sea littoral states from the viewpoint of the Russian authorities.[31] The organization encompasses all the Black Sea coastal states, along with countries from the Balkan, Eastern European and South Caucasian regions. Economic difficulties, severe political problems among the member states and obligations to other international cooperation organizations act as restraining factors in the way of the BSEC to grow as a promising and competent regional integration scheme.

Even so, the BSEC retains the character of an intra-regional collaboration arrangement, in which Russia plays one of the leading roles through organization of regular meetings, taking part in various cooperation projects and strengthening commercial bonds with the regional states. Therefore, competitive regional groupings in the Black Sea spearheaded by Georgia and Ukraine such as the GUAM and the Community of Democratic Choice as well as the ones headed by Romania and Bulgaria such as the Black Sea Forum for Partnership and Dialogue

[30] Elias Götz, "It's Geopolitics, Stupid: Explaining Russia's Ukraine Policy," *Global Affairs* 1, no. 1(2015): 4.

[31] See "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," January 12, 2008 and "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," February 18, 2013.

and the Black Sea Synergy understandably received a cold welcome from Russia. Russian officials underlined the lack of need for additional structures in the presence of the BSEC.[32]

Imposing economic embargo on the products and services of the Western-leaning governments of the Black Sea to punish them in times of political crisis or to ensure their acquiescence to Moscow's demands regarding political matters is a frequent tactic employed by the Russian policy makers. The prohibition of entry of Georgian products of wine, mineral water and fruits to Russia that started in the spring of 2006 ended seven years later following Saakashvili's removal from power and his successors' decision not to impede Russia's accession to the WTO.[33]

In the summer of 2013 Russia banned imports of dairy products, fruits, vegetables, meat, sunflower oil and alcohol from Ukraine most likely in retaliation of easing of trade barriers between Brussels and Kiev ahead of the expected free trade agreement.[34] On December 21, 2015, the Russian government made another declaration regarding a new ban on the import of agricultural products, raw materials and foodstuffs from Ukraine which would be effective as of January 1, 2016[35] which could be taken as another attempt to undermine the pro-Western government in Kiev.

Occasional price spikes along with halting of natural gas supplies to Georgia and Ukraine during the winter season owing to their accumulated unpaid gas bill became another instrument of economic coercion utilized by Russia to set down the Euro-Atlantic tide in Tbilisi and Kiev. Russia ousted Georgia from the preferential pricing system it had set up for former Soviet states during the Saakashvili period and started to deliver natural gas to this country at European prices. Georgia had to import natural gas from Azerbaijan due to high prices and intermittent cut-offs on the Russian side.[36] A similar scenario played out in Ukraine as well in the wake of the assumption of presidency by Yushchenko. Russia, both in 2006 and 2009 increased the gas price it set for Ukraine and interrupted gas deliveries to the country on the grounds that Kiev was siphoning off the gas allocated for European clients to meet its domestic needs. The gas crisis of 2009 was resolved by a new Russian-Ukrainian agreement featuring higher gas price for Ukraine as well as payment of financial penalties that figured large in Yushchenko's poor performance in the presidential election of 2010.[37]

Half of the Russian gas supplies to the EU traverse through the Ukrainian territory[38] and Russia since the early 2000s has been in search of construction of alternative pipelines that will bypass Ukraine and reduce its dependence on this state. The inauguration of the Blue Stream Pipeline in November 2005 which directly carried Russian natural gas to Turkey via an underwater pipeline across the Black Sea constituted a significant move towards this objective. It was followed by the building of Nord Stream Pipeline in 2011 which carried Russian gas to

[32] Andrew Rettman, "EU's New Black Sea Policy Faces Russian Misgivings," *EU Observer*, 16 February 2007.
[33] "News Conference of Vladimir Putin," *President of Russia*, last modified December 18, 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47250.
[34] Marko Bojcun, "Origins of the Ukrainian Crisis," *Critique* 43, no. 3-4 (2015): 403.
[35] "Introducing a Ban on the Import of Agricultural Products, Raw Materials and Foodstuffs from Ukraine," *The Russian Government*, last modified December 21, 2015, http://government.ru/en/docs/21185/.
[36] Scott Littlefield, "Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy: The Contradictions and Consequences of Russia's Passport Distribution in the Separatist Regions of Georgia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 8 (October 2009): 1475.
[37] Adam N. Stulberg, "Out of Gas? Russia, Ukraine, Europe and the Changing Geopolitics of Natural Gas," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62 (2015): 116-117.
[38] Andrey Sushentsov, "Ukraine- A Battlefield or a Bridge between the Russia and the West," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 13 February 2016.

Germany through the Baltic region by leaving out Ukraine. In October 2016 Russia also clinched a new agreement with Turkey which anticipated the construction of a new pipeline which would run from Anapa in southern Russia across the Black Sea to Turkish Thrace[39] thus skipping the Ukrainian territory once more again.

Russia has secured itself a significant place in the economic life of Georgia and Ukraine starting from the early 2000s through various investments in different sectors, partnerships as well as acquisitions. The growing impact of Russian businesses in Tbilisi and Kiev served as a constant reminder to these states concerning possible costly consequences of total break of relations with Moscow. Russia captured the energy infrastructure of Georgia by purchasing controlling shares in gas and power companies. Russian businessmen also invested in banking, real estate, telecommunications, mining, water supply, mineral waters, dairy products and alcoholic beverages sectors in the country.[40] Due to these intricate commercial bonds with Russia, Georgia decided not to join the sanctions applied by the EU against Russia[41] to punish Moscow regarding its Crimean policy.

Russian capital is deeply immersed in the Ukrainian economy as well. Since the early 2000s, Russia has become more powerful and visible in the Ukrainian market through investments, mergers and acquisitions in banking, energy, metal, manufacturing and dairy products sectors.[42] Moscow also tries hard to continue joint production with Kiev in engineering, defense and aerospace industries.[43] Although political relations between Russia and Ukraine have hit their lowest point ever since the end of the Cold War due to Russia's annexation of Crimea, economic ties have proved to be too costly to break off.

When diplomatic reprimand and warning as well as intimidation through economic means did not suffice to withhold Georgia and Ukraine from seeking stricter ties with NATO and the EU, as witnessed in the summer of 2008 and winter of 2013, Russia did not hesitate to resort to military force in order to curb the Euro-Atlantic enthusiasm in these countries. The last part of the study will shed light on the details of this aggressive and assertive foreign policy line in Russia which aims to ensure that Russia, as a great power do not face any competition while pursuing regional hegemony in the Black Sea.

Russia's Utilization of Military Instruments to Point up its Imprint in the Black Sea

Russia has been opting for a narrow and regional-based security scheme in the Black Sea since the early 2000s which dismissed any kind of cooperation with NATO. Thanks to the contribution of Turkey, the second strongest Black Sea power after Russia, Russia managed to create a regional multilateral security structure, Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR) in 2001 which launched soft security initiatives such as search and rescue operations, humanitarian assistance and mine counter measures.[44] Furthermore, Russia has been participating to the Turkey-led naval operation Black Sea Harmony since 2006 which was engaged in activities such as randomly patrolling the Black Sea and detecting and trailing ships suspected of being involved in illegal activities. Both Ankara and Moscow rejected the

[39] "TurkStream," *Gazprom*, accessed November 28, 2016, http://www.gazprom.com/about/production/projects/pipelines/built/turk-stream/.

[40] Nata Dzvelishvili and Tazo Kupreishvili, *Russian Capital in Georgian Business*, accessed November 29, 2016, http://www.damoukidebloba.com/assets/up-modul/uploads/pdf/Russian_Capital.pdf.

[41] Zurab Dzhavakhadze, "Georgia Rejects Anti-Russian Sanctions — PM," *TASS*, 6 August 2015.

[42] See Alexey V. Kuznetsov, "Industrial and Geographical Diversification of Russian Foreign Direct Investments," *Electronic Publications of Pan-European Institute* 7 (July 2010): 6-17, Filippos Proedrou, "Ukraine's Foreign Policy: Accounting for Ukraine's Indeterminate Stance between Russia and the West," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 10, no. 4 (December 2010): 450 and Sushentsov.

[43] Bojcun: 399.

[44] "BLACKSEAFOR," *Turkish Naval Forces*, accessed December 3, 2016, https://www.dzkk.tsk.tr/data/icerik/229/Karadeniz_2.pdf.

American offer to expand NATO-led Operation Active Endeavor in Mediterranean into the Black Sea whose mission was to conduct maritime operations in the Mediterranean zone against terrorism, illicit arms, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration.

While Russia was content to reach an understanding with Turkey in the Black Sea region, it never failed to keep an eye out for the possible admission of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO. Therefore, although NATO hesitated to grant Membership Action Plans to Georgia and Ukraine at the Bucharest Summit that took place in April 2008, the declaration that they would become members of the Alliance sometime in the future irritated Russia. Both President Putin and the Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that the eastern enlargement of NATO was evaluated as a national security issue for Russia and they would do everything at their disposal to prevent Georgia and Ukraine from acceding to the Alliance.[45]

Russia was especially apprehensive of the growing military bonds between Georgia and the USA and the former's efforts to bring its armed forces into compliance with NATO standards. Putin, in his speech at Bucharest Summit also underlined that NATO membership would not ensure restoration of Georgia's sovereignty in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. [46] Moreover, two weeks after this speech, on April 16, 2008, Putin signed a decree which anticipated formation of direct official relations between Russia and the secessionist authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as provision of Russian passports, financial aid and security assistance to these separatist regions[47] in order to corroborate his warning.

Georgia was cognizant of the fact that the absence of its authority on break-away regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia cast a long shadow over its possible membership to NATO. Thus, Tbilisi commenced a military offensive on August 7, 2008, to restore its rule in South Ossetia. This move drew an immediate and heavy-handed response from Moscow. Russian President Medvedev described the Georgian operation as an "aggressive military action against Russian peacekeepers and civilians"[48] and ordered the land, air and sea forces of Russia to run to the help of South Ossetia. After a five-day war Russia succeeded in expelling Georgian forces from Abkhazia and South Ossetia and recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on 26 August 2008.

Russia's military incursion to Georgia not only halted Georgia's NATO membership but also strengthened the Russian military position in the eastern part of the Black Sea. Russia set out to reinforce the military base in Gudauta with S-300 air defense systems and to build a new naval base in Ochamchire, Abkhazia for its Black Sea Fleet in the wake of the 2008 war.[49] Moreover, with the agreement signed with Abkhazia in 2014 Russia was granted the privilege to co-determine foreign policy as well as to develop defense and security space in Abkhazia which included joint-protection of borders with Georgia.[50]

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[45] Adrian Blomfield and James Kirkup, "Stay away, Vladimir Putin Tells NATO," *The Telegraph*, 5 April 2008 and "Moscow to Prevent Ukraine, Georgia's NATO Admission," *RIA Novosti*, 8 April 2008.
[46] "Text of Putin's Speech at NATO Summit (Bucharest, April 2, 2008)," *UNIAN*, last modified April 18, 2008, http://www.unian.info/world/111033-text-of-putins-speech-at-nato-summit-bucharest-april-2-2008.html.
[47] Brian J. Ellison, "Russian Grand Strategy in the South Ossetia War," *Demokratizatsiya* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 352.
[48] "Dmitry Medvedev Had a Telephone Conversation with Federal Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel," *President of Russia*, last modified August 8, 2008, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/1045.
[49] Carolina Vendil Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund, "Russia's War in Georgia: Lessons and Consequences," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20, no. 2 (June 2009): 403.
[50] "Meeting with President of Abkhazia Raul Khadzhimba," *President of Russia*, last modified November 24, 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47057.

Ukraine's preparation for signing an association agreement with the EU was appraised by the Russian leadership as another expediting factor for the country's future membership to NATO taking into consideration the fact that all former Soviet states that had become members of the EU were embraced into NATO in a short span of time as well. Following the break-down of the EU-brokered peace deal between the Yanukovych and the three opposition leaders that envisaged the holding of early presidential elections, formation of a national unity government and reverting to the 2004 constitution which would remove some of the president's powers[51] and Yanukovych's departure from Ukraine on 21 February 2014, Russia secured the integration of Crimea which hosted the Russian Black Sea Fleet and was predominantly composed of ethnic Russians into the Russian mainland by giving a hand to the separatist factions on the peninsula and started to destabilize the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine where 20-25% of the population were made up of ethnic Russians[52] through political support, advisors, intelligence, arms and small military units. Russia also amassed an army of 30,000 on the Ukrainian-Russian border in order to hinder a large scale military crack-down on separatists by the Ukrainian army.[53]

Russia followed the path of aggression and confrontation in Ukraine because of two main reasons. First of all, it came to the conclusion that circumstances were right and victory seemed likely for a great power like itself.[54] Ukraine did not have the military wherewithal let alone the economic power and political appeal necessary to lure the local people to come up against the Russian intervention in Crimea. It even had a hard time to protect its territorial integrity against the encroachments of the centrifugal forces in the eastern and southern parts of the country. The EU was embroiled in serious political problems and its overdependence on Russian natural gas weakened the Union's hand. The USA, on the other hand, although did not like the fact that Russia was expanding its influence in the Black Sea region, was in need of Russian support to find a permanent resolution to the Syrian quagmire, to work out the Iranian deal, to ensure safe withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan and even to contain China. Therefore, the West precluded any military response and settled for imposition of economic sanctions on Russia to punish its aggression in Ukraine.

Secondly the benefits of expansion exceeded the costs of alienation from the Western world from the Russian point of view. According to the offensive realist school statesmen who were engaged in expansionary moves should rationalize them with tangible benefits such as bases and ports.[55] In line with this argument, Russia, with annexation of Crimea not only relieved itself of future lease payments to the Ukrainian government for the hosting of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol but also captured the Ukrainian naval bases of Novoozerne and Myrny, Saky, Balaklava and the marine infantry base at Feodosiya in addition to 25 warships and many service ships.[56] Furthermore, the deployment of Iskander short-range ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, long-range anti-ship and anti-aircraft

[51] Ian Traynor, "Ukraine Opposition Leaders Sign Deal with Government," *The Guardian*, 21 February 2014.

[52] Stephen Shulman, "Competing versus Complementary Identities: Ukrainian-Russian Relations and the Loyalties of Russians in Ukraine," *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 26, no. 4 (1998):615.

[53] Tsygankov: 285.

[54] John. J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994-1995): 12.

[55] Fareed Zakaria*, From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 20.

[56] Roy Allison, "Russian 'Deniable' Intervention in Ukraine: How and Why Russia Broke the Rules?" *International Affairs* 90, no. 6 (2014): 1278.

missiles and missile-bearing ships and planes on the Crimean Peninsula[57] enhanced the Russian military power vis-à-vis the other Black Sea littoral states and strengthened the Russian assertion for regional hegemony in the Black Sea.

The August War of 2008 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and its contribution to the unrest in eastern and southern parts of Ukraine demonstrated that Russia, as would be expected from a great power, was ready to utilize military tools in order to grow its influence in the Black Sea and to gain the upper hand against other regional powers and rival power centers.

Conclusion

The Black Sea region carries significant weight for Russia due to the strategic location of the area which secures power projection all through the Balkans, Central Europe, South Caucasus, Eastern Mediterranean and the northern Middle East. Owing to the importance of the region for Russian political, economic and security interests, Moscow since the mid-2000s has been pursuing an assertive and resolute foreign policy line to become the regional hegemon in the Black Sea.

Russia pursued a bifurcated strategy to enhance its power base in the Black Sea. Firstly, it elevated political, economic and socio-cultural relations with Turkey, the second powerful country in the Black Sea region after Russia, to unprecedented levels so much so that even serious divergence of opinion over Syrian matter which also precipitated a minor military clash between the two countries in November 2015 did not tear the relationship apart. Moreover, Ankara and Moscow continued to cooperate in various fields concerning the Black Sea within the confines of the BSEC including regional security issues despite Ankara's serious concerns regarding the Russian treatment of Tatar minority in Crimea. Secondly, Russia countered the moves of the rival military and politico-economic blocs, namely the NATO and the EU which tried to expand sway in the Black Sea through taking in of Georgia and Ukraine by employing diverse set of diplomatic, economic and military instruments.

The Russian intervention in Georgia and Ukraine postponed the extension of NATO membership invitations to these countries for an indefinite period of time. However, Tbilisi and Kiev managed to hammer out association agreements with the EU although there seemed to be a slim chance of full membership for these two states due to their severe structural political and economic problems and internal travails of the EU. So, Russia, at least for the time being, operates in a remarkably comfortable and stable environment in the Black Sea. Yet, Moscow needs to improve the infrastructure of Sevastopol base and modernize its Black Sea Fleet with sophisticated ships, submarines and air defense systems in order to attain its aim of regional hegemony. Furthermore, continuation of rapprochement with Turkey is of crucial importance due to the fact that Turkey's lining up with Bulgaria and Romania for an enhanced NATO role in the Black Sea region will complicate the matters a lot for Russia.

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[57] Janusz Bugajski and Peter B. Doran, "Black Sea Rising: Russia's Strategy in Southeast Europe," *Center for European Policy Analysis Black Sea Strategic Report*, no. 1 (February 2016): 11-14.