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Russia in the Mediterranean: Here to Stay

Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

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Summary

Russia's strategy in the Mediterranean is an integral part of its strategy for the wider European theater, which has long been the principal arena of its foreign policy triumphs and setbacks. Europe's dominant position on Russia's foreign policy agenda is a product of its strategic culture, which is in turn shaped by geography, historical legacy, and an elite worldview that considers the West a threat to the domestic political order. It is impossible to understand Russia's current posture in the Mediterranean without viewing it within this larger context and against the backdrop of the country's centuries-old involvement in the region and retreat from it during the quarter century that followed the end of the Cold War.

Since Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria, alarms have been sounded about the Kremlin's ambitions and military capabilities in the Mediterranean. These alarms have been unfounded. Russian capabilities in the Middle East and the Mediterranean region are modest, and the Kremlin's ambitions there are constrained by geography and geopolitics, limited resources, a transactional approach to relationships, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) formidable force posture on its southern flank. As much as Russia may aspire to regional domination, it lacks the means to achieve this goal.

That said, the Russian military is now a presence to be reckoned with in the Eastern Mediterranean. It has complicated U.S./NATO planning and operations, and Moscow has developed good relationships with important regional powers. Given Russia's limited means, its re-emergence in the region can be considered a success, but its effects should not be exaggerated. Moscow's posture in the Mediterranean has been largely designed to protect its gains in Syria and defend against the threat that Russian leaders see from NATO land, air, and naval capabilities to the Russian heartland. The importance of Russia's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) "bubble" over Syria has at times been exaggerated. The systems that make up the bubble are limited in range and in a conflict with NATO would be vulnerable to countermeasures.

Contrary to a widespread perception, Moscow's ambitions in the Mediterranean are more than a matter of its vague pursuit to regain great power status—they are a product of enduring Russian national security requirements. The principal rationale for Russia's return to the region has been the prospect of a military confrontation in the European theater and concerns about the vulnerability of its southern flank in a conflict with NATO. While Russia has sought, in fact, to regain its old Cold War footing—and has been skillful and opportunistic in exploiting openings to expand its footprint—it has acted with caution, avoiding undue risks and, most of all, an outright confrontation with the United States.

The Kremlin may aspire to dominate the Mediterranean one day, but for now its aim is to deny this option to NATO. Russia is in the Mediterranean to stay, and its push for a greater naval, air, and land presence and increased political influence will continue as long as it remains locked in a tense standoff with NATO in Europe. This warrants heightened vigilance but not, as has often been the case, fears that Russia has replaced the United States/NATO as the key power broker in the region.

Introduction

Russia's strategy in the Mediterranean is an integral part of its strategy for the wider European theater, which has long been the principal arena of its foreign policy triumphs and setbacks. Europe's dominant position on the country's foreign policy agenda is a product of its strategic culture, which is in turn shaped by geography, historical legacy, and an elite worldview that considers the West a threat to the domestic political order.¹ It is impossible to understand Russia's current posture in the Mediterranean without putting it in this context and the long history of the country's involvement in the region and retreat from it during the quarter century that followed the end of the Cold War.

Russia's push into the Mediterranean, which has intensified since its military deployment to Syria in 2015, is more than a matter of the ambition to be recognized as a global player but a product of enduring national security requirements, threat perceptions, and economic interests. The period from the end of the Cold War to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, during which Russia was largely absent from the Mediterranean, was a departure from a centuries-old involvement there. The relatively peaceful post-Cold War interlude is over and the adversarial relationship between Russia and the West has resumed, with the Mediterranean as an important sphere of competition in the European theater. Russia's presence in the region after 2014 shows a great deal of continuity with Soviet and pre-Soviet times, when developments in Europe were the principal drivers of policy.

At the same time, the post-2014 dynamic is hardly a replay of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War competition in the Mediterranean, which was the dominant feature of the region's political and security environment. While Russia and the United States and its NATO allies are bound to remain significant actors in the Mediterranean, the dominant dynamics in it are likely to be a product of its indigenous political, economic, and societal forces, which, as recent experience has demonstrated, none of these outside powers have the means or apparently the will to shape.

This paper is part of a series that will offer a comprehensive examination of Russia's return to the Mediterranean.² The first section examines Russia's historical legacy of involvement in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean and identifies the key enduring drivers of its policy there. The second section reviews the record of Soviet policy in the Mediterranean during the Cold War. The third section provides an overview of Russia's return to the Mediterranean after its post-Cold War retreat and a broad assessment of its policy, capabilities, and results to date. The paper concludes with implications for the interests and policies of the United States and its allies in the Mediterranean.

Geography Is Almost Destiny

The origins of Russia's engagement with the Mediterranean region are impossible to establish precisely, but by the tenth century AD, merchants from Kievan Rus were trading with Constantinople. The conversion of Kievan Rus to Christianity in 988 during the reign of Prince Vladimir, who also married the Byzantine emperor's sister, created the foundation for the religious ties between the nascent Russian state and Byzantium. These have endured to the present day, and more than once throughout the history of the Russian empire they served as a basis for the geopolitical ambitions of its rulers.³

Those ambitions can be traced to an uninterrupted chain of military and diplomatic pursuits in the late seventeenth century, as Russia expanded and emerged as a full-fledged participant in European politics. For the next two centuries, its push toward the Mediterranean, necessitated by the lack of access to warm water ports, driven by both its geopolitical ambitions and commercial interests, took the form of successive military campaigns against the Ottoman Empire. From the time of Peter the Great's seizure of the town of Azov (which was returned to Turkey in 1711), each new conquest created the rationale and the springboard for the next, even if separated by decades. Gaining access to the Sea of Azov made it imperative for Russia to gain control of the Kerch Strait to secure access to the Black Sea.⁴

Whereas the bulk of Peter the Great's conquests were on the shores of the Baltic, the next great Russian ruler—Catherine—focused her geopolitical ambitions and conquests on the south. She secured access to the Black Sea in a series of wars with Turkey that resulted in Russia annexing Crimea and gaining the territories along the sea's northern littoral in the late eighteenth century. These new lands were christened Novorossiia (New Russia). However, access to the Black Sea was not an end in itself, for Catherine's sights were set on the Mediterranean. The wars with Turkey that she launched and that were continued by her successors throughout the nineteenth century were part of European geopolitics practiced by evolving coalitions of great powers.

With the conquest of Novorossiia and the founding of Odessa, Sevastopol, and other cities in the newly conquered lands, the springboard for seeking access to the Mediterranean was established. The first of Catherine the Great's wars with Turkey in 1768–1774 saw the first deployment of a Russian naval squadron to the Mediterranean. After an almost year-long voyage from Kronstadt around Europe, the fleet arrived in the Eastern Mediterranean in June 1770 and won a major victory against the Turkish fleet in the Battle of Chesme.⁵

This victory underscored the importance of securing naval access to the Mediterranean as the rivalry with Turkey remained a major preoccupation of Russian foreign policy. Although the right of passage through the Turkish-controlled Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits remained a distant goal, the quest for a foothold in the Mediterranean became the embodiment of Russian geopolitical objectives. This was also often indistinguishable from spiritual and religious motives. One of Catherine the Great's ambitious geopolitical schemes entailed support for the independence of fellow Orthodox Greeks from Turkey and the establishment of a Greek state ruled by her grandson Konstantin, with Constantinople as its capital.⁶ In addition to its territorial gains, Russia won a major concession at the conclusion of the war of 1774—the right to intervene on behalf of sizable Christian populations of the Ottoman Empire from the Balkans to Georgia, which planted the seeds of more conflicts between the two empires.⁷

For well over the century and a half that followed, Russian-Turkish relations were punctuated by wars and diplomatic maneuvering, with Russia mostly on the offensive and the Ottoman Empire on the defensive. These wars were fought from the Caucasus to the Balkans. They were driven by a mix of geopolitics and religion as Russia continued its quest for new territory and insisted on its right to intervene on behalf of fellow Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman lands.

The ultimate prize—control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits to ensure uninhibited passage for Russian commercial and naval ships and keep hostile European powers out of the Black Sea to avoid the repeat of the disastrous Crimean War of 1853–1856—proved elusive (and remains so to the present day). It was partly achieved in 1936 with the signing of the Montreux Convention. This allowed for the passage of warships to and from the Black Sea, but established strict limits on the size, number, timing, and duration of stay in the Black Sea of nonlittoral nations' warships, as well as some limits on the passage of the latter's ships. Turkey remained in control of the straits, enforced these limits, and kept the authority to close the straits to all foreign warships in wartime.⁸ Throughout almost the entire duration of the Second World War, Turkey remained neutral, and the straits were closed to warships of both warring coalitions.⁹

Old Challenges Remain Post-1945

With the fall of European colonial empires after the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War, the Mediterranean witnessed an unprecedented expansion of Soviet presence—military, naval, diplomatic, and economic. The Soviet Navy took its first steps toward establishing a continuous presence there in the late 1950s, which it maintained throughout the Cold War.¹⁰ The list of Soviet client states or partners around the Mediterranean included at one time or another Albania, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, and Syria.

The race between the United States and the Soviet Union to secure partners and clients among the postcolonial states of North Africa and the Middle East attracted a great deal of attention during the 1960s and 1970s, as did the two superpowers' tensions during the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973. Often overlooked, however, was the Soviet leadership's motive for seeking a foothold in the Mediterranean in the context of the Cold War standoff in the European theater: U.S. carrier-based aircraft and nuclear-armed submarines (SSBNs) on patrol in the Mediterranean posed a direct threat to the Soviet heartland.¹¹

The Soviet presence in the Mediterranean was hampered by many of the same limitations that had proved so frustrating to military leaders and diplomats of the Russian empire. By virtue of geography and politics, the Soviet Navy was limited in its ability to deploy and sustain a significant permanent presence there. Turkey, now a member of the hostile NATO, controlled the straits while Moscow's regional partners proved to be not very reliable in supporting the Soviet presence.

As a result of ideological differences between the Soviet Union and Albania in 1961, the Soviet Navy had to leave the base in Vlore to which it had gained access in the 1950s.¹² Egypt was for a time considered a close ally and client of the Soviet Union, but in 1972 its president at the time, Anwar Sadat, ordered the Soviet military to leave the country out of frustration with what he perceived as insufficient support from Moscow.¹³ Libya's Muammar Qaddafi proved an erratic and difficult client, though he allowed the Soviet Union to use the former U.S. Wheelus Air Base (and U.S. officials judged he would permit Soviet warplanes to use airfields in Libya in the event of a conflict between NATO and the Soviet Union); he was also an avid buyer of Soviet weapons and accepted Soviet military advisers.¹⁴ That left Syria as the only reliable Soviet partner in the Mediterranean—hardly enough to support a major naval or military presence throughout a vast region dominated by the United States with its massive military and naval presence as well as a web of allies and partners from Spain to Turkey.

The combination of difficult geography—access to the Mediterranean controlled by two NATO allies (Spain in the west and Turkey in the east) and one U.S. partner (Egypt in the south)—and a shortage of adequate basing facilities meant that such limited Soviet military, in particular naval, presence as could be sustained had to prioritize the essential mission: the possibility of war with NATO and an attack against the homeland.¹⁵

The Soviet Union also deployed its vast tool kit—diplomatic presence, political penetration, economic aid, arms sales and military advisers, and so on—in an effort to expand its web of relationships throughout the Mediterranean. It provided economic assistance and large amounts of military hardware to actual and prospective clients, often on favorable terms with loans that had little chance of being repaid. Moscow dispatched advisers and at times combat personnel, backed its partners diplomatically and militarily in times of crises and conflicts, and educated their scientists, engineers, and doctors at Soviet universities. Wherever and whenever possible, the Soviet pursuit of influence in

the Mediterranean relied on friendly leftist movements and communist parties (or any government or movement that was friendly to the Soviet Union regardless of its ideological leanings), front organizations promoting peaceful policies intended to undermine U.S. military presence and NATO cohesion, and support for terrorist organizations and assassinations.¹⁶

The postcolonial countries of North Africa initially welcomed support from the Soviet Union and seemed like promising candidates for building a web of clients in the Mediterranean that would enable a presence to counter the dominant position of the United States. But over time they proved to be less than reliable partners and clients. Some, like Egypt's Sadat and Libya's Qaddafi, grew frustrated with Russian support; Algeria, while securing large purchases of arms and other forms of assistance from the Soviet Union, proved reluctant to join its camp and embraced the Non-Aligned Movement, benefiting from the courtship by Moscow and Washington, which were both eager to have it as a client; Tunisia, while nominally non-aligned, favored closer ties to the West.¹⁷ The situation along the Mediterranean's northern rim was even more problematic. From Spain to Turkey the entire coastline was NATO territory except for Yugoslavia and Albania, neither of which the Soviet Union could count upon as an ally in a confrontation with NATO.

Overall, despite great ambitions and investments, and even occasional successes, the results of the Soviet Union's pursuit of a sphere of influence in the Mediterranean were modest at best and frequently disappointing. Throughout the Cold War its ambitions were contained by a combination of the country's geography and East-West competition. What had been an established and constant naval presence came to an end in 1993.

A Pause Before Business as Usual

The end of the Cold War marked the beginning of a major strategic realignment in Europe and the Mediterranean. Russia withdrew from its outer and inner empires to focus on its domestic problems, which kept it preoccupied throughout the 1990s. With its resources depleted and its defense establishment crumbling, Russia effectively disappeared from the Mediterranean as a naval, military, and geopolitical actor. The remnants of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet were divided with Ukraine, and Russia all but ceased to exist as an effective naval force.

The continuing presence of the Russian fleet in Sevastopol, based on a treaty negotiated with Ukraine in 1997, faced an uncertain future considering the latter's aspirations to join NATO.¹⁸ With the 2008 commitment by NATO to admit Ukraine and Georgia as members at some unspecified future, Russia's Mediterranean ambitions not only seemed to fade into the past, but its Black Sea presence also came into question. That commitment held out the possibility that Russia would lose access to Sevastopol, leaving it with only one major port in Novorossiysk and presenting Moscow with the prospect of

the Black Sea becoming a NATO lake with grave consequences for its security.¹⁹ Bulgaria and Romania had joined NATO in 2004. In 2011, the United States and Romania agreed to deploy one missile defense site in Romania, which Russian officials claim could pose a threat to Russian security.²⁰

These were important considerations in the Kremlin's decisions to wage war in 2008 against Georgia and invade Ukraine six years later. Their prospects of NATO membership and until then closer partnership with the alliance promised a major transformation of the Black Sea region, new threats to Russia's ability to project power into the Mediterranean and defend its position in the Black Sea, and a shift in the overall NATO-Russia balance on Europe's southern edge. Crimea and Sevastopol, in President Vladimir Putin's words, could become another platform for U.S. missile defense components and launch pads for missile strikes against Russia.²¹

In the context of the Black Sea and Mediterranean, the conflicts with Georgia and Ukraine assumed much greater significance than the Kremlin's ambitious but vague declarations about a sphere of "privileged interests."²² Waged to keep both countries from joining NATO, they have achieved more than their intended purpose. In the eyes of foreign observers, the conflicts have created two hostile states on Russia's southwestern border. But from Moscow's perspective they prevented the penetration of a hostile alliance in this critical region, the shrinking of its presence in the Black Sea with ensuing new challenges for its access from the Mediterranean, and a significant deterioration of the correlation of forces on Europe's southern flank and consequently the entire European theater. The two wars also restored Russia's possession of Crimea—a critical focal point for the defense of southern Russia and a platform for projecting power and influence in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

However, the Georgia and Ukraine conflicts—and the massive military reform and modernization of the armed forces, including naval capabilities, launched after the 2008 war with Georgia—could not compensate for the challenge that geography and European geopolitics have posed to Russia for centuries.²³ Its warships still have to transit the straits controlled by Turkey or sail around Europe, as they did in the days of Catherine the Great, past the shores of NATO allies and partners from the Gulf of Finland to the strait of Gibraltar. Russian warplanes must fly through unfriendly airspace if they are to reach the Mediterranean. Both have become more problematic as a result of the two conflicts.

The Syrian Pivot

Many explanations for the decision to intervene militarily in Syria in 2015—the first such deployment in the post-Soviet era—have focused on the desire to restore Russia to its former position as a major force in Middle Eastern geopolitics. There is no doubt that this goal played a major role in a decision that transformed Russia from a has-been in the region into a major actor once again. Other explanations have focused on the Kremlin's concern about the terrorist threat spreading from Syria to

the North Caucasus and beyond.²⁴ But another, no less important driver, even if not one that immediately drew a great deal of attention, was the balance of power on Europe's southern flank and the NATO-Russia dynamics in the wider European theater.

Russia's military success in Syria has proved highly consequential for its position in the Mediterranean. Syria was Russia's oldest and last remaining client in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, and one where its navy still had a presence. Not much more than a toehold, it was the Kremlin's only outpost in the region. With its military intervention, Russia has reestablished itself as a significant military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean with a long-term base agreement with Syria that secures its presence at the Tartus naval facility and Hmeimim air base, both of which are undergoing major expansion in order to accommodate a greater naval and air presence.²⁵

No less important has been the positioning of the Russian military in a theater that Turkey considers critical for its security and domestic stability. With its military presence in Syria now secured for the long term, Moscow has gained a major source of leverage in its relations with Ankara—not unlike Ankara's position in relation to Russia during the war in Chechnya in the 1990s and early 2000s. This is an important gain for Russia in its standoff with NATO, in which Turkey is potentially the pivotal actor in the context of Europe's southern flank and of the Mediterranean. Russia has engaged in a balancing act with Turkey in a transparent effort to drive a wedge between it and the rest of NATO. While its Syrian deployment has positioned Moscow to exercise pressure on Ankara, both militarily and by holding out the threat of forcing more refugees to flee to Turkey, it supported President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the wake of the attempted 2016 coup while the United States and European countries hesitated.²⁶

Success in Syria has brought even more benefits for Russia in its pursuit of expanded influence in the Mediterranean. As U.S.-Egyptian relations cooled off in the wake of the 2013 coup against former president Mohamed Morsi, the new Egyptian leader Abdel Fattah el-Sisi found a partner in Putin, whose embrace of President Bashar al-Assad in a moment of peril signaled to the region's autocrats that, unlike Washington, Moscow would stand by its friends. The improvement in relations with Egypt for the first time since the expulsion of Soviet advisers in 1972 paved the way for the resumption of arms trade and even discussions of Russian access to the country's military facilities. Egypt and Russia have signed several major arms deals for purchases of Russian fighter jets, helicopters, and other weapons systems worth billions of dollars (the exact amount is not publicly available).²⁷ Still, this burgeoning arms trade is probably not enough to outweigh the effect of the annual \$1.3 billion U.S. defense subsidy to Egypt. Russia apparently has yet to gain extensive access to Egypt's military facilities, even though its military personnel and equipment have reportedly deployed to bases in the west of the country in support of the Libyan National Army (LNA) they both back. Russian and Egyptian units have conducted joint maneuvers, Russian warships have made port calls to Egypt, and the two navies have conducted joint drills in the Black Sea.²⁸

The expansion of Russia's presence in Syria, while significant, has offered Russia only a relatively modest capability for power projection in the Mediterranean. Elsewhere in the region, persistent attempts to rebuild ties to former clients and secure ties with new partners have proved only moderately successful. As in the Soviet era, arms sales have been a useful door-opener, but hardly sufficient to secure the kind of access that diplomats and military leaders have been after in order to establish Russia as a major actor in the geopolitics of the region with diplomatic heft and military capabilities to counter the combined weight of the United States, its NATO allies, and the European Union. Russia's economic tool kit is a pale copy of the resources the Soviet Union was able to deploy during the Cold War, and it does not compare with the resources the United States and the European Union (EU) can muster.²⁹

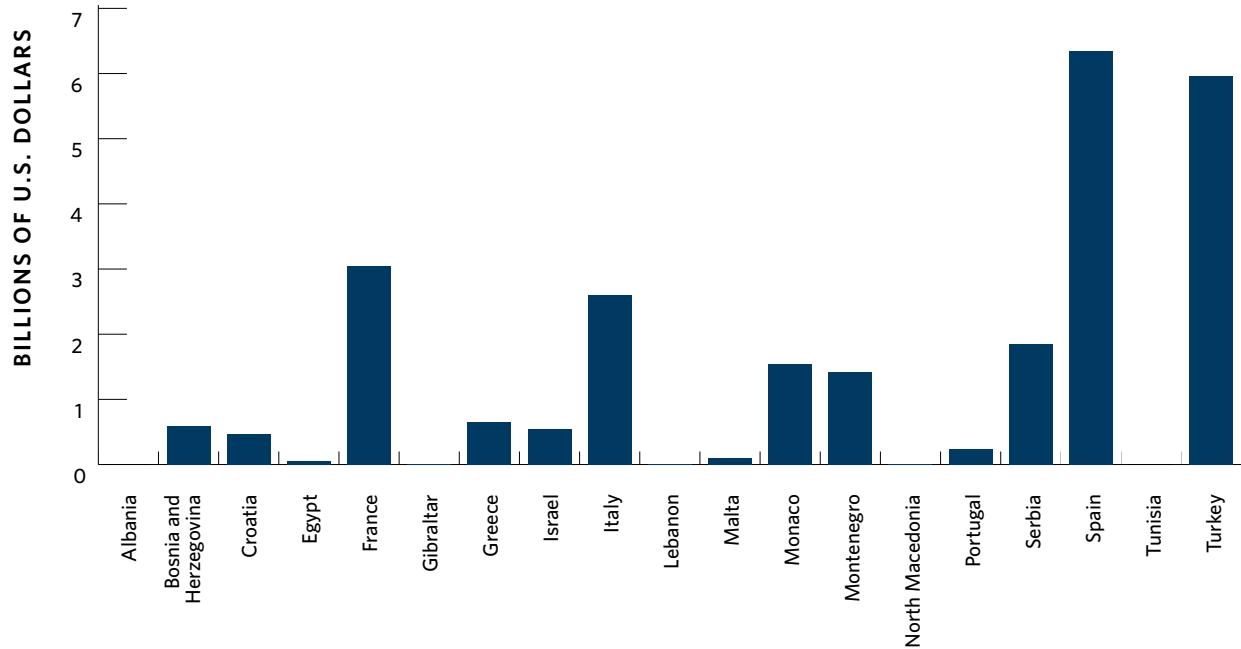
After Syria, Libya presented the next major opportunity to expand the web of Russian influence in the Mediterranean. As the country's civil war escalated, Russia emerged as a key backer of the LNA, headed by General Khalifa Haftar. Support for him has included arms deliveries, deployment of mercenaries and Russian-piloted aircraft from Syria, and financial assistance in the form of counterfeit currency.³⁰ At the same time, the Kremlin has hedged its bets and maintained ties to the UN-recognized government in Tripoli.³¹ Its posture in the Libyan civil war suggests that it is prepared for the long game regardless of how the conflict is settled and plans to remain involved in the country's affairs. The risk to Russian interests in this situation is minimal, if any at all, while the upside—a diplomatic, economic, arms sales, and potentially defense and security relationship with a country strategically situated in the middle of the Mediterranean's southern coastline—is potentially a major prize with far-reaching consequences for Russia's position in the region. Still, a secure foothold in Libya, while an attractive possibility, is only a distant prospect considering the unsettled state of affairs there.

Elsewhere in North Africa, Russia's attempts to expand its relationships are unlikely to be successful. If measured by the number of memorandums of understanding (MOU) and agreements signed, its pursuit of partnerships in the region looks impressive. But if judged by the number of MOUs implemented, trade volumes, and flows of foreign direct investment, as shown in the tables below, the picture is disappointing (see Figure 1).

The much-heralded deal to build a nuclear power plant in Egypt was reportedly signed after multiple delays in 2015, and again in 2017, but construction apparently has yet to begin.³² Simply put, Russia's commercial and economic relationships in North Africa, and throughout the Mediterranean, are unimpressive. It is not a significant source of support for countries in the region looking to develop their economies and boost growth (see Table 1).

FIGURE 1

Russian Direct Investment to Mediterranean Countries (2020)



SOURCE: Bank of Russia. **NOTE:** This excludes Cyprus.

TABLE 1

Two-Way Trade Between Russian and Select Mediterranean Countries (2018)

Country	Trade in U.S. Dollars (2020)	Country	Trade in U.S. Dollars (2020)
Albania	145,495,977	Libya	121,249,866
Algeria	2,914,530,319	Malta	2,286,651,641
Bosnia and Herzegovina	133,179,223	Montenegro	30,872,306
Croatia	981,881,541	Morocco	1,158,840,311
Cyprus	279,276,989	Portugal	72,6435,703
Egypt	4,535,024,443	Slovenia	1,414,369,786
France	12,732,484,623	Spain	4,748,837,184
Greece	2,688,324,784	Syria	190,773,104
Israel	2,161,865,052	Tunisia	495,392,817
Italy	20,223,237,852	Turkey	20,841,267,413
Lebanon	32,7930,577		

SOURCE: Russian Federal Customs Service via Trade Data Monitor

Russia has also used both its oil and gas assets and expertise in exploration and development to attempt to influence governments around the Mediterranean. These efforts have been most successful in Turkey, which wants to position itself as an energy distribution hub for Europe but have fallen short in other countries, particularly those whose indigenous producers compete with Russian companies.³³ Russian energy companies have invested in projects in several countries around the Mediterranean (Egypt, Algeria) and are pursuing more opportunities (Libya), but for these countries Russia is also a rival in the increasingly competitive European energy market.³⁴ Russia's biggest calling card has been arms sales, especially in relations with Algeria, where there is a substantial arsenal of legacy systems from the Soviet era. However, Algeria's trade with Russia is a fraction of that with the EU—\$3.6 billion and \$28 billion, respectively, in 2019.³⁵

It's the Capability that Counts

Having re-established its naval presence in the Mediterranean in 2012 and officially constituted its naval task force in 2014, Russia has had limited success in expanding its access to reliable, consistent basing arrangements for its task force beyond Syria. This is due to the same enduring factors—geography and politics.

The task force has numbered some ten to fifteen surface combatants and submarines supported by the Tartus naval facility. Most of these deploy to the Mediterranean from the Black Sea Fleet, but some deploy from the Baltic and Northern Fleets, and they use their maintenance and repair facilities.³⁶ A new maintenance facility at Tartus is expected to ease the operational and logistical strains of sustaining naval operations in the region.³⁷ Russia has signed agreements with Cyprus and Malta for limited port access. However, both countries are EU members, maintain robust defense cooperation with the United States and NATO, and have kept Russia at arm's length.³⁸

The Russian task force is hardly a match for the U.S. Navy's Sixth Fleet, NATO's Standing Force in the Mediterranean (STANAVFORMED), and the air and naval forces of the alliance's southern members. Although there are only four destroyers (homeported in Rota, Spain) and one command ship permanently assigned to the Sixth Fleet, its actual order of battle varies throughout the year, when it assumes operational control over carrier battle groups, amphibious ready groups, and independent surface combatants as they either transit its area of responsibility or are assigned there for short periods for exercises and operations. Over the past few years, ships under the command of the Sixth Fleet have routinely made port visits throughout the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, including in Algeria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Israel, France, Romania, and Spain.³⁹ They have been far more active in engaging with regional navies than their Russian counterparts.⁴⁰ In addition,

the United States maintains significant air assets in Italy and Turkey. And in the event of a major crisis in the European theater, the fleet's order of battle would be augmented with reinforcements from other regions.

The naval and air capabilities of alliance members on the southern flank also need to be factored into the military balance between NATO and Russia in the Mediterranean. NATO's STANAVFORMED typically consists of eight destroyers and frigates from the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, and several other allies on the southern flank.⁴¹ More importantly, NATO's six southern members have close to ninety principal surface combatants and over 1,300 air combat capable aircraft including naval aviation.⁴² Russian air-power assets in the Mediterranean are modest in comparison with these forces. Russia has no air base outside of Syria, and its air power in the region consists of fewer than four dozen fighter, bomber, and attack aircraft.⁴³

A great deal of attention in recent years has been accorded to Russian A2/AD bubbles deployed around Crimea and in Syria.⁴⁴ These capabilities include the most advanced S-400 air and missile defense systems with ranges of up to 400 kilometers, as well as shorter-range and coastal defense missile systems.⁴⁵ The Russian military has used Iskander short-range ballistic missiles and the Kalibr family of ship-based cruise missiles in the war in Syria, demonstrating its strike capabilities against land- and sea-based targets.⁴⁶ The Kalibrs, which are reportedly capable of carrying nuclear warheads, could pose a significant threat to U.S. and allied land- and sea-based assets. But when considered in the overall context of Russian capabilities in the Mediterranean, their likely mission is to hold NATO ships at risk in the event of a contingency in the European theater or deter any attempts to challenge Russian presence in Syria.⁴⁷

Notwithstanding widespread concerns about Russian A2/AD bubbles, some studies suggest that their capabilities and the challenge they may pose to NATO may be considerably less formidable than initially feared.⁴⁸ Impressive as they may be, these sea-, air-, and land-based assets amount to a relatively modest capability for power projection in the Mediterranean; they can complicate the ability of NATO navies and air forces to operate within their range and thus offer a measure of protection to Russian bases in Crimea and Syria. In the absence, however, of significant air and naval assets beyond these bubbles, Russia appears to be outmatched by NATO's far superior naval and air presence throughout the region. Given NATO's capabilities and the availability of countermeasures, the more pertinent question is not whether but how the alliance can overcome Russia's A2/AD bubbles.

Conclusion and Implications for U.S. Interests and Policies

A great deal has been written about Russia's expansive ambitions and "great power exertions" in the Mediterranean.⁴⁹ However, its limited capabilities and reach in the region suggest that, as much as Russia may want to become the dominant geopolitical and military presence there, it does not have the means to do so. These capabilities point to a more limited goal: denying NATO the ability to dominate the Mediterranean as it did after Russia withdrew from it at the end of the Cold War, rather than attempting to dominate it.

Given its limited means, Russia's return to the Mediterranean should be seen as a success. The Kremlin has been determined, patient, skillful, and opportunistic in seeking and seizing openings created by developments indigenous to the region, such as the upheavals triggered by the Arab Spring, and by policies of the United States and its allies, in particular the desire to reduce commitments in the region and avoid deeper entanglements in Syria or Libya. Russia has taken calculated risks but avoided over-committing its resources, prestige, and credibility to the pursuit of unrealistic objectives and, most importantly, provoking an outright confrontation with the United States.⁵⁰ Russia has re-emerged as a military presence to be reckoned with in the Eastern Mediterranean. It has complicated U.S. and NATO planning and operations, laid a powerful claim to restore its position in the Black Sea, established itself as a major presence in Syria and Libya, fashioned a good relationship with Israel and a reasonably good if sometimes uneasy one with Turkey, reconnected with Algeria and Egypt, and burnished its great power credentials. These are important Russian gains.

However, the threat that Russia's return to the Mediterranean poses to U.S. core interests should not be exaggerated. The United States is still uniquely positioned in the region to prevent terrorist attacks against its homeland; Russian-Israeli relations do not undercut the U.S. commitment to the security of Israel; and Russia's naval presence has not posed a threat to freedom of navigation in the Mediterranean. The importance of Russia's A2/AD "bubble" over Syria has at times been exaggerated—these assets are limited in range, and in a conflict with the United States and its NATO allies they would be vulnerable to long-range weapons launched from a variety of land-, air-, and sea-based platforms.

Russia faces considerable long-term constraints in sustaining its influence and capacity for power projection in the Mediterranean. It has no interest or ability to partner with countries there to resolve the myriad challenges they face to their security, stability, and prosperity, which would require a major commitment of resources and deeper involvement in the region's conflicts, with all the risks that would entail. There are no signs that Russia is prepared to make these kinds of investments. Its transactional approach to relationships with other countries simultaneously facilitates and limits its reach and staying power. And, for all the rhetoric about Russia being daring and reckless, it has acted with caution and restraint in the region, and shown a healthy intolerance for risk.

This assessment of Russia in the Mediterranean has drawn three central conclusions: First, Russia's capabilities in the region are modest, and it faces formidable obstacles in realizing its ambitions. Second, the principal rationale for Russia's return to the Mediterranean has been the prospect of a military confrontation in the European theater rather than the desire to regain great power status; the region is therefore a subordinate arena to the principal confrontation between Russia and the West. Finally, Russia's return to the Mediterranean is intended to regain, albeit with diminished resources, its old Cold War footing, driven by enduring objectives of its confrontation with the West.

Russia's return to the Mediterranean continues a long legacy of involvement there, driven by ambitions, interests, and threat perceptions that have endured for centuries. There is no reason to expect this posture to change in the near or distant future. Russia is in the Mediterranean to stay, and its determination to expand its naval, air, and land presence there will continue.

About the Authors

Eugene Rumer is a senior fellow and the director of Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program. Prior to joining Carnegie, Rumer was the national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia at the U.S. National Intelligence Council from 2010 to 2014. Earlier, he held research appointments at the National Defense University, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and the RAND Corporation. He has also served on the National Security Council staff and at the State Department, taught at Georgetown University and George Washington University, and published widely.

Richard Sokolsky, currently a nonresident senior fellow in Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program, worked in the State Department for six different administrations. During his tenure there, he was the director of the arms control office from 1990 to 1997 and a member of the Secretary of State's Office of Policy Planning from 2005 to 2015. He has also been a senior fellow at Carnegie, the RAND Corporation, and the National Defense University. His writings have been published in numerous outlets.

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Notes

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- 50 Rumer, “Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None.”



1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW | Washington, DC 20036 | P: +1 202 483 7600

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