



Russia's Ambitious Military-Geostrategic Posture in the Mediterranean

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The Mediterranean is a significant component of Moscow's military strategy: the basin provides an access point to southern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. In the eyes of the Russian elite, the Mediterranean is also an arena of great power competition with the United States and NATO. Through a smart buildup of naval and anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) assets, as well as through clients like the Syrian Arab Army, the Kremlin strives to counter NATO's presence in the region and [protect Russia's southern flank](#). Given the hardship facing Russian defense economics and the poor shape of the country's shipyards, Moscow's power-projection agenda in the Mediterranean is a far more realistic and effective strategy for the Russian Navy than the pursuit of a global blue-water posture to challenge U.S. naval supremacy.

In line with the grand design and geopolitical worldview of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Russia's military leadership has rigorously established a robust and ambitious strategic posture in the Mediterranean. Within a decade, Russia has emerged as a challenger on Europe's southern flank. In Syria, Russian deployments

have set up an [A2/AD bubble](#) over the Levant. The Syrian frontier has greatly helped the Russian Armed Forces develop combat-proven capabilities and test over 200 new weapons. Russia's infamous arc of steel now extends to the Mediterranean and poses a potential threat to NATO's freedom of movement in this important region. In Libya, a mixture of Russian Aerospace Forces and private military contractors (PMCs) have equipped the Kremlin with considerable geopolitical leverage.

THE RUSSIAN MILITARY'S COMEBACK AFTER THE POST-SOVIET FALL

The Kremlin's geostrategic calculus in the Mediterranean overlaps with a Soviet-type resolve based on a comprehensive framework that prioritizes spheres of influence and alliances with client states. Since the rapid collapse of the regime of former Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, Moscow has shown a firm willingness toward military interventions in the Mediterranean to safeguard its clients. Syria is the manifestation of this political-military understanding.



In a way, therefore, [Russia's campaign in Syria](#) since September 2015 has been an effort to recover lost ground after the Kremlin's miscalculation in Libya. This calculus is essential to grasp the lines that the Russian leadership draws between its Syrian and Libyan portfolios. The Russian authorities have been heavily critical of the 2011 UN-backed Western intervention in Libya. Moscow believes that Western powers misused UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which Russia supported, to undertake regime change in Libya.

In a broader sense, however, the Syrian campaign—and the Mediterranean expedition in general—is about a larger geopolitical gambit: the rise of the Russian military after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the 1990s, Russia's post-Soviet military faced the dramatic decline of its doctrinal order of battle, combined with budgetary, combat-readiness, and personnel setbacks. More importantly, immediately after the Cold War, there was an undeniable ambiguity with respect to the Russian Armed Forces' role as Moscow struggled to determine its—and its military's—place in the world. Russia had cut military expenditure drastically during a decade of post-Soviet economic turbulence. The fielding of [new weapons systems](#) slowed and even halted altogether in some cases. Russian military formations lacked financial resources and even fuel to keep their combat edge. Intelligence reports suggest that wages were often months in arrears, combat readiness was at a minimum for most formations, and, more significantly, the armed forces' popular image was extremely poor. In the mid-1990s, the First Chechen War showcased these difficulties for the Russian military.

While the 2008 Russia-Georgia War hinted at some comeback success, the Russian military was still underperforming. Although Moscow successfully reached its strategic goals in that conflict, there were [critical shortfalls](#) in tactical engagements, logistics, and operational art.

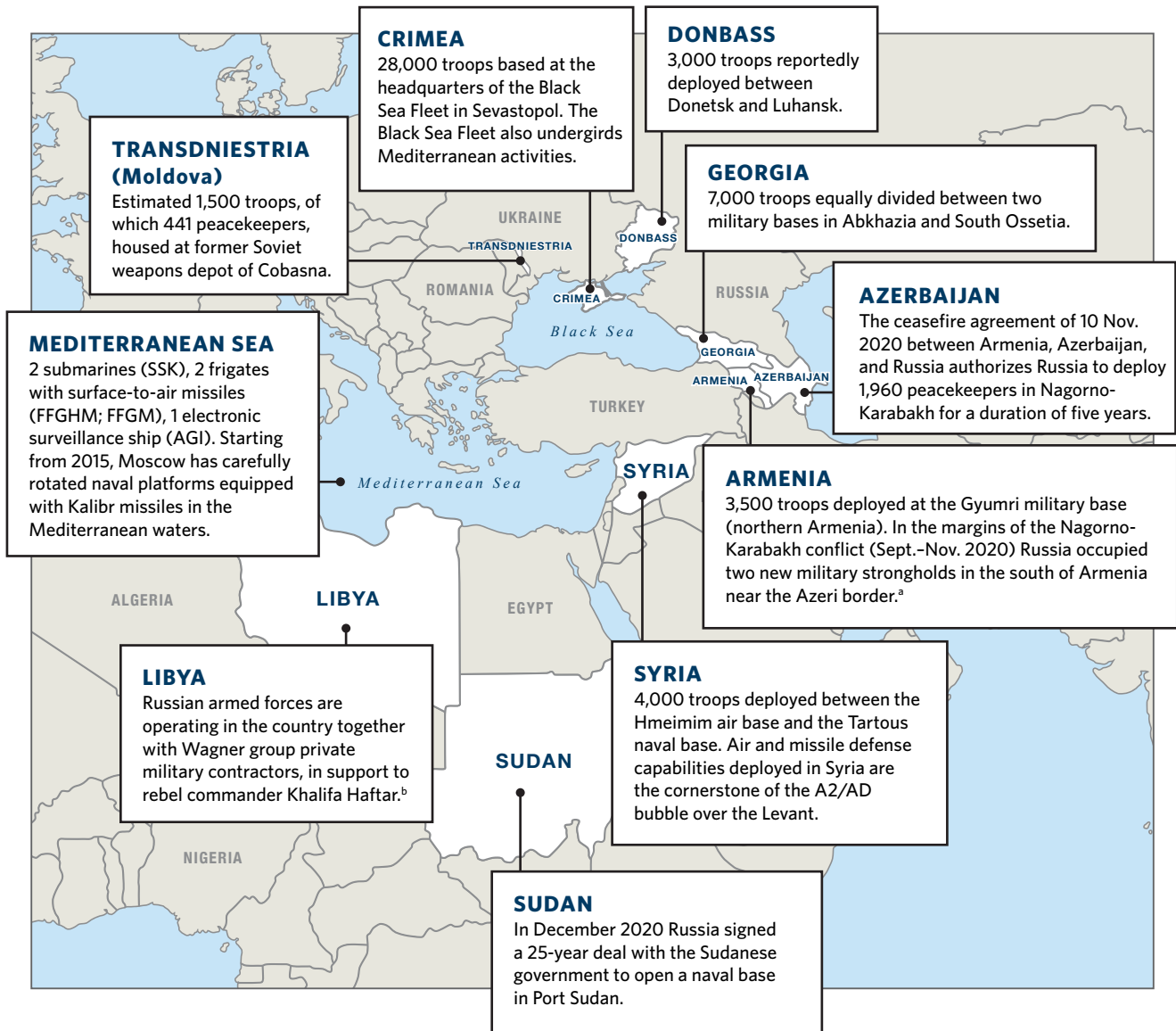
Within Moscow's comprehensive framework, a key objective of the Russian forward presence in Syria relates to efforts to develop military capabilities in a larger geopolitical context. In other words, the Syrian expedition has always been about translating military lessons learned in the Levant into improvements in the armed forces' overall combat capabilities. This is why the Kremlin's Mediterranean strategy is not only about the Mediterranean region (see map 1).

Russian analysts emphasize certain pillars of the Syrian expedition. Moscow has managed to build what one think tank scholar has called a [“very productive symbiosis”](#) between its expeditionary forces and Syrian Arab Army formations. According to Russian experts, the capabilities of the Syrian regime's combat formations have been considerably bolstered. These efforts include the establishment of whole new Syrian military units, such as the Fifth Assault Corps. Another important aspect is the systematic incorporation of PMCs—mostly well-paid retired Russian security servicemen—into major operations, rather than support roles.

Syria has also served as a testing ground for the Russian military's warfare conduct, weapons systems, and concepts of operations. [Open-source intelligence reports](#) suggest that Russia's defense leadership has sent “every military district commander and several other key generals” to command the Russian deployment in Syria for a minimum of six months each. This means that every Russian military district is now led by an officer with at least six months' experience commanding forces in combat—a major learning opportunity that Moscow could not have achieved without its deployment in Syria.

This practice extends to the operational and tactical echelons of the Russian military. As of October 2018, some [63,000 professional Russian officers](#) and contracted personnel had completed at least one tour in Syria. Although this figure is still small compared with Russia's large manpower capacity, the exposure of some services and branches to active combat is higher.

Russia's Presence in and Around the Mediterranean Basin



a <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-military-armenia-reinforce-areas-near-azeri-border-agencies-2021-05-03/>, last accessed May 27, 2021.

b <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/32887/russia-deploys-military-fighter-aircraft-to-l>, last accessed May 27, 2021.

NOTE: Unless otherwise indicated, all figures are taken from IISS Military Balance 2021.



The military police, for example, had rotated nearly 98 percent of its total active personnel in Syria by 2020. As for the Russian Aerospace Forces, 87 percent of tactical aviation staff and 91 percent of rotary-winged crews had gained real combat experience in Syria by October 2018.

The Russian Aerospace Forces carried out some 44,000 sorties between September 2015 and November 2020. The air warfare gains made were invaluable to Moscow. As one Russian military expert put it, “the Russian Aerospace Forces had many assets but little real combat experience in modern warfare. . . . Since [the 2008 Russia-Georgia War], the Russian Aerospace Forces have received about 1,000 new and modernized aircraft and helicopters but had no experience operating them and little understanding of the new capabilities.”

As a result of these gains, Russia’s strategic activities on its southern flank cannot be isolated from the threat

landscape on NATO’s eastern flank that informs the alliance’s defense planning. Although Russia’s contemporary doctrinal order of battle is predominantly defensive, the lessons learned from combat operations in Ukraine and Syria and Russia’s indirect intervention in Libya have upgraded the effective capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces. These tested capabilities can easily be translated into the positioning of assets in Russia’s Western Military District against NATO member states along Russia’s western border.

From the standpoint of Russia’s posture in the Mediterranean, three additional trends can be highlighted. First, Russia has been enhancing its naval base in the Syrian city of Tartus. While Tartus was a logistical base during the Soviet era, the Russians have been diligently investing in the facility, turning it into a hub for more complex naval operations.

MAP 2

The Air Bridge Between Syria and Libya



SOURCE: Joseph Trevithick, “Russia Now Has At Least 14 Combat Jets In Libya As Satellite Images Reveal New Details”, The Drive, May 27, 2020, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/33698/russia-now-has-at-least-14-combat-jets-in-libya-as-satellite-images-reveal-new-details>, accessed on May 18, 2021; <https://mobile.twitter.com/USAFricaCommand/status/1265630878295785477>

Second, Russia has forward-deployed A2/AD capabilities in the Levant. The Russian military has deployed a layered air- and missile-defense architecture in Syria with S-400 and S-300V4 strategic surface-to-air missile systems, Buk-M2E missiles, and Pantsir batteries to cover long, medium, and short ranges, respectively. This formidable [air-defense architecture](#) is networked with the Syrian Air Defense Force's assets, sea-based S-300FM systems embarked on missile cruisers, and Krasukha-4 and other electronic warfare systems deployed at the Hmeimim air base.

Finally, one of the most interesting aspects of Russia's military involvement in Syria relates to the logistical connection established with Libya (see map 2). The Russian Mig-29 and Su-24 fighter aircraft deployed to Libya—as first reported and confirmed by [U.S. Africa Command](#)—flew there from Hmeimim. Strikingly, [Hmeimim](#) has also been instrumental in servicing Russian air traffic to Benghazi and Al-Watiya air base in Libya. These developments suggest the rise of a systematic link between Russian forward-basing efforts in Syria and deployments in the North African country.

CAPITALIZING ON THE SOVIET NAVAL LEGACY

Within a doctrinal order of battle that comprises four fleets and one flotilla, the Russian Navy's primary objectives are sea denial and the safeguarding of Russia's submarine-based nuclear deterrent. Due to growing shipbuilding limitations, Moscow's maritime capabilities focus on littoral defense, with few expeditionary capabilities. The Northern and Pacific Fleets cover Russia's nuclear deterrent. The Northern Fleet is the most advanced and is responsible for Russia's [Arctic portfolio](#).

Since Russia's illegal 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, the Black Sea Fleet has added an expeditionary capability to this order of battle. This fleet, which operates from Crimea, has been augmented

with new platforms and weaponry and underpins Russia's [Mediterranean activities](#).

The evolving role of the Russian Navy supports the military's forward-basing efforts in the Eastern Mediterranean. This evolution dates back to July 2015, when Putin personally assembled a meeting aboard a Russian Navy frigate to discuss the military's naval strategic road map. Tellingly, one of the meeting's top agenda items was [Russia's foothold in the Mediterranean](#). Later that year, Russia announced a new, aspirational maritime doctrine. The document was designed to give the navy a more robust outlook in accordance with Moscow's paradigm of great power competition. Although this planning marked a new chapter in Russia's military thinking, the country's contemporary concepts in the Mediterranean follow in Soviet footsteps.

The Soviet Navy's Mediterranean portfolio dated back to 1958 as Moscow's geostrategic response to the Eisenhower Doctrine, under which the United States offered to protect Middle Eastern countries threatened by communist aggression, and the [U.S. intervention in Lebanon](#), known as Operation Blue Bat. Later, the Soviet military's Mediterranean strategy led to the birth of the Fifth Eskadra—the navy's Mediterranean squadron—to counterbalance the U.S. Sixth Fleet. The Fifth Eskadra and the Kremlin's political-military stance marked a symbiotic relationship in which the Soviet Navy pioneered Moscow's regional interests. Furthermore, the cultivation of strategic ties with regional actors enabled the Soviet Navy to [maintain a standing presence](#) away from its home ports in the continental Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union's Mediterranean deployments were more about sending strategic signals and promoting Moscow's influence abroad, as well as counterbalancing the West, than about building actual naval war-fighting capacities. Besides, the Soviet Mediterranean naval group had to operate with several limitations: the Montreux Convention governing control over the



Turkish Straits, the mercurial characteristics of states and regimes in that part of the world, and overstretched logistics from the Soviet mainland to the southern seas. As a result, instead of forward-homeporting a bulky maritime task force, Soviet defense planners opted for a **flexible doctrinal order of battle** for the Fifth Eskadra, which was reinforced at times of escalation, such as the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars.

Today's Russian naval deployment strategy in the Mediterranean is similar to Moscow's Cold War posture. However, the combination of new weapons systems, novel concepts of operations, and more ambitious political-military goals enables a more capable set of assets.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF CRUISE MISSILES

The development and operationalization of a new family of cruise missiles has significantly augmented the Russian military's power-projection capabilities in the Mediterranean.

For at least three centuries, **Russian military-strategic culture** was deeply shaped by the idea of expanding Russia's influence toward its southern waters: the Sea of Azov, the Black Sea, and the Caspian Sea. These waters were also critical routes for Russian power projection into the Mediterranean and the Middle East while serving as maritime buffers to keep Russia safe. Throughout history, Russian elites attached great importance to maintaining access to warm-water seaports on the Black Sea, which is linked to the world's oceans through the Turkish Straits, and to using the Black and Caspian Seas as channels to enter the Middle East.

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of geopolitical competition in Russia's southern seas. When the Fifth Eskadra was disbanded in 1992, Turkey—a NATO member—loomed large as the primary naval actor in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the meantime, as Ukraine became independent in the

Black Sea region, Russia's maritime military arc between the Mediterranean and Black Sea basins was challenged significantly.

Against this backdrop, the Black Sea Fleet has predominantly pursued the Kremlin's power-projection efforts in the Mediterranean. Since its 2014 annexation, **Crimea has come to the fore** in this respect. Equipping the Black Sea Fleet with conventional strategic offensive capabilities in the form of new-generation Kalibr cruise missiles is the top priority of the Russian naval modernization program. In October 2015, Russia's Caspian Flotilla launched the first **land-attack cruise missiles** to pound the Syrian battleground. The early successes of this new era of missile warfare substantially influenced Russian naval strategic developments: since 2015, Moscow has carefully **rotated naval platforms** equipped with Kalibr missiles in Mediterranean waters.

This new chapter for the Russian Navy, along with crucial lessons learned from the Mediterranean frontier, is of key importance for the military balance between Russia and NATO for three reasons. First, Kalibr is an umbrella term for a broad set of capabilities. In the words of **one security analyst**, "there are well over a dozen different variants in the Kalibr missile family, varying in launch platform, range, target profile and speed."

Second, Kalibr missiles can be launched from a broad array of platforms, from small surface combatants—suitable for the Caspian Flotilla—to submarines. Therefore, the missiles are a very flexible asset that enables a long list of operational scenarios.

Third, Kalibr missiles can form a key pillar of Russia's maritime power perspective. Even though the country's shipbuilding sector has been facing difficulties, strategic forecasts estimate that by 2024, the Russian Navy could operate up to eighty-five Kalibr-capable surface combatants and submarines with over 1,200 launch cells across its fleets and flotilla. This would represent what one analyst has described as true "**distributed lethality**." With its achievements in Syria, Russia has become one

of the few nations that can launch [conventional surgical strikes](#) with multiple platforms in different parts of the world from thousands of miles away.

RUSSIA'S INTENSIFIED SUBMARINE PRESENCE

The Russian Navy has only limited capabilities in traditional power projection and expeditionary naval warfare platforms. Russia's largest surface combatants are legacy Soviet-era warships, which will become less sustainable and, eventually, obsolete over time. Most of the new and modern surface combatants are relatively small vessels. What is more, [Russia's amphibious landing platforms](#) are reaching the ends of their natural lives. As a result, submarines play an important role in meeting Moscow's power-projection ambitions.

Since the Russian intervention in Syria began in 2015, the Mediterranean has witnessed an intensive submarine presence. Moscow's submarine boost came right after Russian operations started in the Levant. In February 2016, Vice Admiral Clive Johnstone, then commander of NATO's Maritime Command, said that his submarine cells were reporting more [activity from Russian submarines](#) than they had seen since the Cold War. In the same year, Russian submarine activities in the Mediterranean reached an unprecedented tempo. [Open-source military publications](#) noted in December 2016 that the U.S. Navy and NATO forces had tracked down at least two Russian guided-missile submarines in the Mediterranean.

At least one of these submarines was probably a Project 949A Antey. Equipped with P-700 Granit supersonic sea-skimming antiship missiles, this formidable platform is known as a carrier-killer sub, whose primary mission is to hunt down aircraft carrier battle groups. What is more, the Russian carrier-killer submarine identified in 2016 was thought to be in close proximity to at least two [Western aircraft carriers](#), the U.S. Navy's USS *Eisenhower* and the French Navy's *Charles de Gaulle*.

Russia's submarine presence in the Mediterranean is also important in terms of the Russian Armed Forces' submarine-launched cruise missile (SLCM) capacity. After launches from surface combatants in early December 2015, the Russian Navy conducted its first Kalibr SLCM strikes in Syria from its submarine platforms. These Tomahawk-like strikes marked a turning point for Russian concepts of operations: traditionally, Soviet and Russian long-range missile concepts were planned either for nuclear warhead delivery or for A2/AD missions. An SLCM capability is possibly the most game-changing asset that Russia has tested in its Mediterranean campaign.

Finally, given [Soviet submarine operations in Swedish territorial waters](#) in the 1980s, especially systematic intrusions into coastal defense zones and major naval bases, one strategic aim of current Russian submarine operations could be to test NATO's naval response capabilities in the Mediterranean. In this respect, it is important to note that the Russians are believed to be regularly rotating at least two [Varshavyanka-class submarines](#) from the Black Sea Fleet to the Tartus base in Syria.

THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AS A THEATER FOR MOSCOW'S DEFENSE CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT

The U.S. Navy has historically sustained its combat posture through a geopolitical perspective consisting of two hubs. Whereas the Mediterranean and the Western Pacific were priorities during the Cold War, the northern Arabian Sea and the Gulf have replaced the Mediterranean since Operation Desert Storm against Iraq in 1991. As a result, Moscow found a more suitable landscape for its activities in this critical sea basin on NATO's southern flank.

In the past decade, Moscow has smartly capitalized on developments in the Eastern Mediterranean to enhance its overall military posture in three ways. First,

since the annexation of Crimea, the Russian Black Sea Fleet has been more active in projecting power into the Mediterranean. Taking advantage of free passage through the Turkish Straits, Moscow has established a strategic naval bridge between the Black Sea Fleet and the enhanced naval base in Tartus. This bridge now extends to Libya.

Second, the experiences gained in the Syrian theater and, more recently, in Libya have allowed the Russian military to train its personnel and test a range of new capabilities that can easily be transposed to other, more strategically critical geographies, like Eastern Europe.

Finally, Moscow's doctrinal order of battle has improved with the launches of new platforms and systems in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia's boosted naval operations, its long-range, high-precision, sea-launched Kalibr cruise missiles, and its forward-deployed airpower assets in the Mediterranean are manifestations of this military reality. Russia has pursued a gradual and multidimensional expansion of its military capabilities in a conflict zone where, with the exception of Turkey in Libya, it has not encountered any resistance from NATO allies. This experience is likely to greatly enhance Russia's military posture in potential conflict zones like Eastern Europe or the Baltic, where the challenge of containing Russia's ambitions is significantly more important for the alliance.

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NOTES

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