

OPINION | RUSSIA

Crimea Isn't the End of Russia's Black Sea Ambitions

With NATO on the defensive in Eastern Europe, Putin wants to flex naval might to the south.

By [James Stavridis](#)

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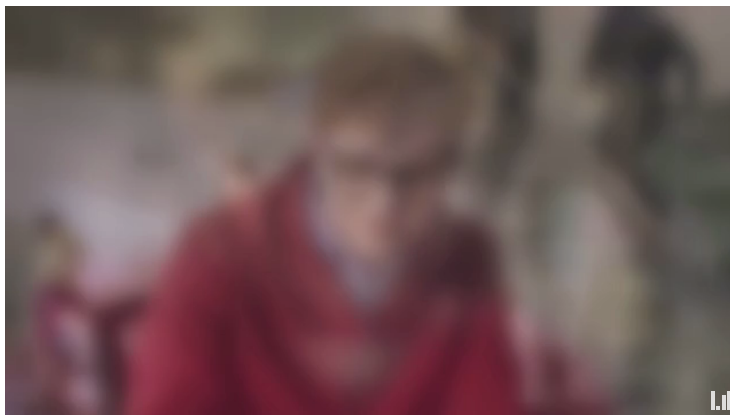


The czar would be proud. *Photographer: Vasily Batanov/AFP/Getty Images*

Russia forces just wrapped up their highly publicized [Zapad military exercise](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/31/world/europe/russia-military-exercise-zapad-west.html), their largest since the end of the Cold War. It involved more than 100,000 troops, front-line offensive tank and armored personnel carrier formations, vast close-air support, and significant [naval operations in the Baltic Sea](https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-10-05/russia-s-latest-game-challenging-nato-at-sea). Having successfully concluded this real world “object lesson” in Eastern Europe largely for NATO’s benefit, look for the Russians to shift their attention to the south and the most strategically important sea on their periphery: the Black Sea.

In terms of geopolitical competition, the Black Sea has been of key value since ancient times, stretching back to the voyages of the ancient Greeks along its shores. (It was reputedly the location of the voyage of the Argonauts searching for the Golden Fleece.) Over the centuries, the Greeks, Romans, Ottomans, Georgians, Armenians, Romanians, Bulgarians and other kingdoms large and small populated its shores and competed over its rich sea lanes of communication. For Russia in particular, [old ghosts rattle](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/battles/crimea/) through the Black Sea, especially on the Crimean Peninsula. In the mid-19th century, the forces of the Ottoman Empire, Britain, France and other allied European powers fought the Czar’s Russia there, resulting in half a million Russian dead -- mostly from disease and wounds.

Crimea, which became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in 1954, remains a center of tension between Russia and the West, now embodied by NATO. Russia has formally annexed it, controls a significant portion of southeastern Ukraine through proxy actors, and often muses about further annexations to create a “land bridge” between itself and the peninsula. As a result of the occupation and active conflict (more than 10,000 dead thus far), serious sanctions against Russia continue to bite its economy and prevent cooperation with the West in a variety of other issues such as the Syrian civil war.



Russia also occupies the sovereign territory of yet another close partner of NATO on the Black Sea: the Republic of Georgia. Moscow wields control over two significant portions of Georgia -- Abkhazia and South Ossetia -- that it seized illegally <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/08/putin-heads-to-occupied-georgia-territory-on-war-anniversary/> after a short, sharp war in 2008. No other non-NATO country has sent more troops per capita to Afghanistan than Georgia. As the alliance's former supreme allied commander, I often visited its grievously wounded soldiers in both Georgia and at U.S. hospitals.

Finally, from a geopolitical perspective, the north coast of Turkey, the immensely important Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits separating the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea, and the coastlines of several other NATO allies are all under pressure from Russian naval activity -- most of it operating out of the former Ukrainian-Russian naval base at Sevastopol <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/07/ukraine-russia-crimea-naval-base-tatars-explainer> . It is the ideal warm-weather port that Russia has long sought, and a window on the Mediterranean. As the Russians consolidate control over bases on the Syrian coast, they will link the Aegean and Mediterranean with their Black Sea Fleet and exert significant influence throughout the region, challenging NATO just as they do in the Baltic Sea to the north.

It's not just geopolitics: There are significant economic incentives for Russia to challenge NATO and its partners. In addition to recent oil and gas discoveries <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-02-23/shell-signs-offshore-oil-gas-exploration-accord-with-bulgaria> , the idea of lucrative pipelines that could ultimately connect the so-called Three Seas <http://observer.com/2017/10/impending-russia-threat-to-europe-calls-for-marshall-plan-2-0/> -- Adriatic, Baltic and Black -- is attractive to Moscow. Russia desperately wants to be able to control the Black Sea economically in peacetime, while remaining ready to dominate the region in the event of conflict with West.

What should NATO do to deter Russia's designs on this vital "southern sea"? The best course is to approach the Black Sea as a strategic zone of focus and to ensure that forces are active, on station, and ready for both peacetime influence operations and potential combat, just as the alliance does in the Baltic Sea and Arctic.

First, NATO should enhance its program of port visits, exercises and training missions. This means frequent visits to ports in Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria, as well as stops in Georgia and the unoccupied coast of Ukraine. This could be carried out by the NATO Standing Naval Force based in the U.K., which is under the command of a British three-star admiral and consists of more than 20 frigates, corvettes and minesweepers <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/admiral-nato-s-standing-naval-forces-are-the-alliance-s-first-responders> .

Second, the alliance needs to develop and fund a coherent contingency plan for Black Sea maritime operations. While some aspects of such an arrangement are already incorporated into various NATO operational plans, it is time to do the detailed analysis to be prepared to exercise both sea control and power projection across its waters. This planning should be done jointly by the maritime command in the U.K. and the

alliance's [Joint Force Command](https://www.jfcnaples.nato.int/) in Naples, Italy, which is headed by a four-star admiral. One of the great advantages of NATO is its robust standing [operational command structure](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/126245.htm) , some 9,000 Allied troops spread across the 29 nations -- we should put it to use in planning for Black Sea operations.

Third, the U.S. specifically needs to increase its deployments independent from NATO operations. It has four powerful destroyers with Aegis weapons systems permanently assigned to Rota, Spain, for missile defense and show-the-flag operations in the Mediterranean. They need to get up to the Black Sea more frequently, training and operating with partners and allies there.

Fourth, the U.S. needs to work especially closely with Turkey, which effectively holds the keys to the Black Sea through its control of the straits that guard it. Under the terms of the [Montreaux Convention of 1936](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/naval-arms-control-1936.htm) , the rules governing passage are extremely restrictive, and Turkey has refused to sign the United Nations Law of the Sea Treaty, which would move the straits into the more relaxed set of standards that governs virtually every other such body of water in the world. U.S.-Turkish relations strained at the moment, but remain critical in any strategy that enhances Washington's military options in the area.

Finally, the U.S. can encourage Western businesses to invest in Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine. Oil and gas are key, but so are logistics, fiber cables and other communications development. Helping these countries link their economies both in the Black Sea community as well as to Europe and the U.S. is the sort of "soft power" that can enhance stability in the region.

NATO has significant work to do in the Black Sea. Better strategic cooperation and economic links are the best chance to counter Russia's ambitions in this most strategic of southern seas.

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To contact the editor responsible for this story:
Tobin Harshaw at tharshaw@bloomberg.net