

## THE SEIZURE OF CRIMEA – A GAME CHANGER FOR THE BLACK SEA REGION

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I would like to steer your attention to the Black Sea region, not because I come from Bucharest, and Romania has a stretch of the Black Sea shore, but because Crimea's seizure and annexation by Russia changes dramatically the geopolitical and strategic balance in the Black Sea region, which forces the US and NATO to re-evaluate strategically and tactically the Black Sea and Mediterranean areas.

1. The Black Sea is a traditional direction for Russian expansion. In fact, the first direction of expansion for the founder of the Russian Empire, Peter the Great, was to the South, to the shores of the Azov and Black seas, towards Crimea. Moscow, 'The Third Rome', was organically tempted to get closer geographically to the first two, meaning Constantinople and Rome, the warm seas, the Black and Mediterranean seas, not the frozen North.

In 1688, a Russian military campaign against the Tatars of Crimea failed. Were it not for the peace at Carlowitz and the Northern War, Peter the Great would have probably concentrated his attention and resources on the Black Sea region over the following few years. However, the 1711 defeat at Stanilesti, on river Pruth, when the Czar himself was miraculously saved (Oriental corruption played a determining role in this), froze for half a century Russia's expansionist projects in the Black Sea area.

It was as late as 1771 that Catherine the Great occupied Crimea, which she annexed twelve years later, in 1783. For the following 200 years, the Black Sea region remained the centre of attention for the political, military, and art elite, penetrating deeply the Russian and Soviet public consciousness, whether we talk about the Russian-Turkish wars, the Crimean War, the Black Sea Straits, or the film and music of the soviet generations.

Some, and not a few, of those who are now part of Russia's foreign security and policy apparatus, came up intellectually reading Aleksandr Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*, a book published for the first time in 1997, and following several editions, in issues of tens and hundreds of thousands of copies:

Ukraine's sovereignty is such a negative phenomenon for Russian geopolitics that, in principle, it can easily burst into armed conflict. [...] Ukraine as an independent state manifesting territorial ambitions is a great danger for the whole of Eurasia, and without solving the problems raised by Ukraine, any discussion of continental geopolitics is rendered pointless. [...] It is an absolute imperative in Russian Black Sea geopolitics for Moscow to have total and unmitigated control over the entire territory from Ukraine to Abkhazia [...] The northern coast of the Black Sea has to be exclusively Eurasian and under Moscow's centralised control<sup>1</sup> (Dugin 1997, p. 348).

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<sup>1</sup> 'Суверенитет Украины представляет собой настолько негативное для русской геополитики явление, что, в принципе, легко может спровоцировать вооруженный конфликт [...] Украина как самостоятельное государство с какими-то территориальными амбициями представляет собой огромную опасность для всей Евразии, и без решения украинской проблемы вообще говорить о континентальной геополитике бессмысленно. [...] Абсолютным императивом русской геополитики на черноморском побережье является тотальный и ничем не ограниченный контроль Москвы на всем его протяжении от украинских до

The project that President Putin brought with him to the Kremlin upon his return in 2012 is the founding of the Euro-Asiatic Union. Ukraine is a centrepiece of this project. However, the active part of Ukrainian public opinion sees the future of its country with the European Union, not the Euro-Asiatic Union. Paradoxically, no European capital, maybe with the exception of London, Warsaw and the Baltic capitals, would have supported Ukraine's integration, while Moscow was inviting Kiev into the Euro-Asiatic Union.

If in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the game changer in the Black Sea area was the annexation of Crimea by Catherine the Great, in 2014 Russia's seizure and annexation of Crimea was a game changer not only for the larger Black Sea region, but for the entire global security system. Now, in February 2014, the trigger was a fear that a pro-Western government in Kiev would allow NATO to take control of the naval base at Sevastopol, which would have ended the Russian Black Sea Fleet and force projection into the Mediterranean.

What happened in the last year in Crimea will have a formative influence on security arrangements in the wider region, from the Black Sea, Caucasus, and Eastern Balkans to the Mediterranean.

2. The US and NATO can no longer count on ruling the waves of the Black Sea, or on being uncontested in the Mediterranean. The major implication here is that the whole expeditionary model of US power, especially the US ability to project power across transoceanic distances, is in question. At the same time, the credibility of US deterrence umbrella, but also the capability to enforce international law and the global rules of the road (like freedom of the seas) are also in question. As former US Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel emphasised: 'without our superiority, the strength and credibility of our alliances will suffer. Our commitment

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абхазских территорий. [...] Северный берег Черного моря должен быть исключительно евразийским и централизованно подчиняться Москве.'

to enforcing long-established international law, rules of the road, and principles could be doubted by both our friends and our adversaries'. Another important paragraph in Chuck Hagel's speech in Rhode Island on September 3rd 2014: China and Russia

are also developing anti-ship, anti-air, counter-space, cyber, electronic warfare, and special operations capabilities that appear designed to counter traditional U.S. military advantages – in particular, our ability to project power to any region across the globe by surging aircraft, ships, troops, and supplies. All this suggests that we are entering an era where American dominance on the seas, in the skies, and in space – not to mention cyberspace – can no longer be taken for granted (US Department of Defense, 2014, 1).

Moreover, in a keynote speech at the Reagan National Defence Forum, Hagel made this reality the rationale for trying to develop the foundations of a new strategy designed to offset the Russian and Chinese trends:

...while we spent over a decade focused on grinding stability operations, countries like Russia and China have been heavily investing in military modernisation programs to blunt our military's technological edge, fielding advanced aircraft, submarines, and both longer range and more accurate missiles. They're also developing new anti-ship and air-to-air missiles, counter-space, cyber- electronic warfare, undersea, and air attack capabilities. America must continue to ensure its ability to project power rapidly across oceans and continents by surging aircraft, ships, troops and supplies. If this capability is eroded or lost, we will see a world far more dangerous and unstable, far more threatening to America and our citizens here at home than we

have seen since World War II (US Department of Defense, 2014, 2).

However, in a European context, these trends question the reassurance package adopted at NATO's Wales summit. The expeditionary solution that the NATO summit brought forth in order to fix the vulnerability of the Eastern Flank via the spearhead force might prove inadequate in a time of maturing anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) complexes.

Over the past 25 years, denial forces have increasingly won the competition with forces of what used to be called traditional expeditionary power projection. The A2/AD forces are neutralizing many of the assumptions that used to be at the core of US power projection,

These traditional features are becoming outdated because of the keep-out zone that Russia is building by investing in its own A2/AD capabilities. Simply put, Russian denial forces can keep at bay any promised NATO reinforcement.

3. The emerging A2/AD Russian bubble over the Black Sea. Although all eyes are currently focused on the Baltic region and the Northern Flank of NATO, the Black Sea might become a rather probing ground for NATO's credibility in the near future. In recent years, the traditional modes of power projection that gave the US the ability to gain access, operate and be forward present in key strategic regions of the world have been challenged. Over the past decade, states like Russia, Iran and China seemed very interested in gradually developing anti-access (A2) and area-denial (AD) postures (Tangredi 2013). These capabilities are aimed at

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<sup>2</sup> A2 (anti-access) are those actions and capabilities, usually long-range, designed to prevent an opposing force from entering in an operational area.

<sup>3</sup> AD (area denial) are those actions and capabilities, usually shorter range, designed to limit the enemy's freedom of action within the operational area.

building keep-out zones or regions where traditional freedom of action can be denied. The maturation of these access-denial complexes will make it harder for the US to deploy, project power, gain access, and even operate in certain theatres.

China is the first manifestation of this trend that countries, and even non-state actors, follow by developing anti-access bubbles. At the same time, protected by this A2/AD umbrella, China will be increasingly incentivised to gradually alter the geography of the region, operating below the threshold of a formal *casus belli*. Recent developments in the South China Sea, as well as the establishment of an Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea, seem to validate this assessment.

The annexation of Crimea is already shifting the geography of the Black Sea region. It used to be called a Russian lake; now it is becoming an A2/AD Russian bubble. James Sherr, an Associate Fellow at Chatham House, summed up the new strategic reality very well when he said in the House of Commons:

the Russian Black Sea fleet has, in the past, been constrained by various agreements about what it could and could not do as far operation, modernisation and the kinds of weaponry — nuclear and conventional — deployed there. Those constraints no longer exist. A massive modernisation programme has been announced. That includes, in short order, the deployment of Russia's most advanced long range area denial weapons, which affect a large part of Turkish air space and extend right out to the Bosphorus and, perhaps, beyond. It raises new questions about the vulnerability of any surface assets that we send into the Black sea. (Sherr 2014).

4. Crimea is becoming the centre of gravity of the Russian A2/AD Black Sea posture. By the end of the decade, Russia's Black Sea force will tally

206 ships. By 2016, the Black Sea Fleet will receive six brand-new Kilo-class submarines that will be stationed at a new base at Novorossiisk. In addition, Tu-22M3 long-range strategic bombers will be deployed in the region (Delanoe 2014).

Overall, by the end of the decade, Moscow's plans to spend US \$151 billion to modernise its navy and the Black Sea Fleet represent one of Moscow's highest priorities. The modernisation will emphasise the emergence of a counter-intervention capability for the Black Sea along the lines of A2/AD logic, including submarines, anti-shipping, anti-surface and anti-air capabilities. At the same time, the annexation of Crimea will add long range land-based missile systems (like the S-400 SAM system) including the Iskander surface-to-surface missiles, which have an operational range of 400 kilometres (Delanoe 2014).

If information published in the Kiev weekly *Zerkalo Nedeli* finds confirmation from alternative sources, that means that the militarisation of Crimea occurs at an infernal pace, with no analogue in the Black Sea area. This process should worry the countries in the region, and not only them, as the Defence Ministry in Moscow plans to hand combat flags to 40 *new* military units in Crimea by the end of the year. In the Russian army, combat flags are not handed to battalions, but to units of regiment or brigade size and above. That means the creation of at least 40 new regiments or brigades, each made up of 2,000 to 3,000 men. If at the moment of annexation the number of soldiers in the Black Sea fleet was around 20,000, soon the number of Russian soldiers in Crimea will exceed 100,000. Here we are talking about strategic bomber regiments, fighter jet regiments, Bastion coastal missile batteries, and Iskander-M missile complexes.

In addition, units have been deployed to Crimea that have been restructured, actively trained and rearmed in the North Caucasus, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The military base in Crimea is 200 to 300

km away from the EU and NATO border, as well as Romania's and Bulgaria's shore.

As Russia is developing its access denial posture, freedom of movement might be in jeopardy inside the Black Sea with all the evident consequences for the energy security of the region. At the same time, any effort to reinforce a NATO maritime presence might be out of the question as Russia acquires the capability to transform the Black Sea in a no-go area. To sum up, these various anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles together with the long range S-400 land-based missile systems suggest a 'large spectrum of capability to strike ground targets, interdict maritime traffic and impose a no-fly zone' (Delanoë 2014). That, in effect, means a zone free of NATO influence.

In the Chinese case, there seems to be a correlation between the gradual development of the A2/AD capabilities and the coercive salami-slicing tactics employed in the South China Sea. Consequently, as Russia becomes a mature A2/AD power, it may also employ similar tactics inside the Black Sea.

A few weeks back, in a speech he gave at Bucharest University, Wess Mitchell, president of well-known DC think tank, CEPA, talked about the risk of re-militarisation of the Black Sea, emphasising that a Russia that is revisionist on land could also become revisionist at sea:

Imagine an announcement from Moscow that, on the basis of Crimea's new sovereign ownership, it will resurrect the Black Sea maritime dispute of the past decade, using the original Ukrainian EEZ claim as its own. 40 percent of Romania's Black Sea oil lies within this zone. Even if the claim failed, it could put a chilling effect on foreign investment and jeopardise Romania's plans for energy independence by 2020. [...] Russia's continued advance on southern Ukraine places direct pressure on Romania. In the years ahead,



Romania should expect more frequent Russian violations of its airspace, more Russian maritime harassment of ships and rigs in the Romanian Exclusive Economic Zone.

President Putin is in a hurry. He knows the Russian economy cannot take much more of the sanctions, especially with the price of oil dropping on international markets. As the West is in no hurry to negotiate spheres of influence with the Kremlin, or recognise Russia's annexation of Crimea, Putin doesn't have a lot of alternatives: he either gives up Crimea, pulls out of Donbass, and accepts the right of the Ukrainian people to decide their own fate; turns the local Russian-Ukrainian war into a regional war with unclear end; or, the most probable scenario right now, through A2/AD capabilities and the coercive salami-slicing tactics, destabilises the whole Black Sea region, expanding its control over it.

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