

SECURITY INSIGHTS



Strategic Culture and Geography: Russia's Southern Seas after Crimea *By David Lewis*

Executive Summary

- Geography plays an important role in strategic culture, by placing enduring objective constraints on military and defense policy and influencing the way that political and military elites view the world.
- Although Western attention has been focused on Russian activity in the Baltic region and Eastern Europe, Russian strategy has been more preoccupied with the geography of Russia's southern border. An important role in this southern strategy is played by Russia's three southern seas—the Caspian, Azov, and Black seas—as interconnected maritime platforms for Russia's wider power projection.
- Russia has demonstrated its ideal mode of maritime control through the formation in the Caspian Sea of a form of *mare clausum*—a regime that restricts access for third parties to the sea and *de facto* permits domination by the Russian navy. A similar consolidation of Russian control is under way in the Sea of Azov.
- Russia's annexation of Crimea and modernization of the Black Sea Fleet have transformed its strategic position in the Black Sea. Russia's attempts to achieve geopolitical dominance of the Black Sea will continue to cause serious tensions with Ukraine and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Geography and Strategic Culture

Geography is back in fashion in Russia. The Board of Trustees of the Russian Geographic Society (RGO) is a guide to the most powerful business leaders and officials in Russia today, from Rosneft Chair Igor Sechin to Head of the Presidential Administration Anton Vaino. The RGO's president is Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, while the chairman of the Board of Trustees is Russian President Vladimir Putin himself, who makes a point of addressing the RGO at least once a year.¹

¹ Marlene Laruelle, "Putin the Geographer," *Riddle*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.ridl.io/en/putin-the-geographer>.

Putin has frequently promoted geography teaching in schools, claiming that the subject “serves as the basis for forming patriotic values, cultural and national identity and self-consciousness.”² This interest in geography, of course, is not simply academic but demonstrates how important geography has been in shaping Russia’s strategic culture.³ Russia’s leaders like to think spatially, articulating new geographical visions that extend beyond Russia’s borders—geopolitical imaginaries like a “Russian World,” a “Pivot to the East,” or a “Greater Eurasia Partnership.”⁴ Western attention has long been focused on a Russian threat to the Baltics and Eastern Europe, but it is along Russia’s southern flank—in a long arc from the North Caucasus to Ukraine—that Russian military campaigns and burgeoning naval power are redrawing maps and reviving imperial geographies.

Over more than three centuries, Russian strategic culture was shaped by the expansion of Russian influence toward its three southern waters: the Caspian, Azov, and Black seas. The three seas served as critical strategic routes for Russian—and later Soviet—power projection into the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Middle East while also acting as “maritime forward defensive zones,” effectively buffer zones helping to protect Russia’s frontiers.⁵ Russian strategic culture has been shaped by the importance of maintaining access to warm-water sea ports in the Black Sea, access to the world ocean through the Turkish Straits, and the use of the Black and Caspian seas as channels for military and political access to the Middle East.

Russia’s strategic retreat after the collapse of the Soviet Union suddenly opened up its southern seas to geopolitical competition. The Caspian—a quiet Cold War backwater—emerged as a new geopolitical hot spot in the 1990s, as Western oil companies and the newly independent littoral states—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan—vied for control over oil and gas resources. In the Black Sea, an independent Ukraine gained sovereignty over Crimea, leaving Russia’s naval base at Sevastopol existing on a precarious lease. Turkey’s navy filled the vacuum left by the decline of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. Russia retreated from a wider naval role: Russian vessels largely disappeared from the Eastern Mediterranean for two decades after the Soviet 5th Operational Squadron was disbanded in 1992.

Now Russia is back, with a modernized navy, an ambitious maritime strategy, and a new commitment to project its influence across a wider region to the south, including the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Putin, born and raised in the northern capital of St. Petersburg, has made the Black Sea resort of Sochi almost the second capital of Russia. From his lavish palace in Sochi, he presides over a new sphere of influence in which the three southern seas play vital roles.

² “Putin poruchil sozdat’ atlas mira bez iskazheniya «geograficheskoi pravdy,” RBK, April 27, 2018, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/27/04/2018/5ae334c99a79477e73a6d8ae>.

³ Geography forms a significant element in any strategic culture but has often been overlooked in contemporary strategic studies. For an overview of the role of geography in strategic culture and strategic thought, see Colin S. Gray, ed., *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); G. Sloan, *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategic History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

⁴ David Lewis, “Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy: The Evolution of ‘Greater Eurasia,’” *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 10 (2018): 1612–1637.

⁵ Rod Thornton, “Countering Prompt Global Strike: The Russian Military Presence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean and Its Strategic Deterrence Role,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 32, no. 1, (2019): 1–24.

Caspian Sea

The Caspian has played a vital strategic role for Russia since the time of Peter the Great, who founded the Caspian flotilla in 1722 for a campaign against the Persian Empire. At the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813, Russia gained the exclusive right to maintain a navy on the sea, a tradition of naval dominance of the Caspian that lasted into the 20th century and is now being revived. Although other littoral states have begun to build up naval forces, they are outgunned by Russia, which has extensively modernized the Caspian flotilla since the early 2000s, with two new *Gepard*-class frigates entering service in 2012 and six modern corvettes, several of them equipped with *Kalibr* cruise missiles. To support the flotilla, the Russian defense ministry is completing a new naval base at Kaspiisk to replace the existing base in Astrakhan, which has always been limited by climatic conditions—the northern Caspian freezes in winter.⁶

The Caspian flotilla was previously viewed as having only local military significance, but on October 7, 2015, four Russian ships—including three smaller *Buyan-M* corvettes—launched 26 *Kalibr* cruise missiles at targets in Syria, more than 1,000 miles away. This was a spectacular reminder of how the Caspian could be used to project Russian power across a wide swath of the Middle East. Plans are in place to increase the *Kalibr* missile's range significantly, ensuring that the Caspian flotilla can support military campaigns almost anywhere in the Middle East.⁷ According to Admiral Igor Kasatonov, a former Black Sea fleet commander, “the Caspian flotilla is important for Russia from both a geopolitical and a military-strategic point of view. . . . Despite the fact that the Caspian is a closed sea, [the flotilla] is able to carry out strategic tasks in conflicts such as Syria.”⁸

Russia has accompanied its military build-up with diplomatic breakthroughs. For two decades, littoral states disputed the Caspian's legal status, but a compromise was finally reached in August 2018, when all the states signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. In an important strategic gain for Russia, the Convention committed littoral states to “ensuring security and stability in the Caspian Sea region,” through the “non-presence in the Caspian Sea of armed forces not belonging to the Parties,” and the “non-provision by a Party of its territory to other States to commit aggression and undertake other military actions against any Party.” Article 11 of the Convention restricts “navigation in, entry to and exit from the Caspian Sea exclusively” to “ships flying the flag of one of the Parties.”⁹ The agreement was an important strategic advancement for Russia, which thereby enhanced its military domination of the sea, at the expense of Iran and other littoral states. This model of a *mare claustrum*—a sea closed to foreign shipping—had long been the historical reality in the Caspian but was now enforced by legal and diplomatic agreement, which also extended the principle of exclusion of foreign military assets to the territory of all the littoral states. This idea of a space that excluded the West

⁶ “Kaspiyskoi flotilii postroyat novuyu bazu,” *Izvestiya*, October 2, 2017, <https://iz.ru/650649/nikolai-surkov-aleksei-ramm/kaspiiskaia-flotiliia-pereedet-na-super-bazu>.

⁷ Sara Huzar, “A Higher Kalibr: Russia's Development of New Long-Range Missiles,” Caspian Policy Center, January 18, 2019, <http://www.caspianpolicy.org/a-higher-kalibr-russias-development-of-new-long-range-missiles>.

⁸ “Zachem Shoygu perevodit Kaspiyskuyu flotiliyu iz Astrakhani v Dagestan,” RBK, April 2, 2018, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/04/2018/5ac204939a79472f9efd74f7>.

⁹ “Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea,” 15 August 2018, http://www.mid.ru/en/problematika-bassejna-kaspijskogo-mora/-/asset_publisher/FX0KRdXqTkSJ/content/id/3319235.

and assured a dominant role for Russia has gained much wider resonance in Russian thinking, even in the much more contested waters of the Black Sea.

The Volga-Don Canal and the Eurasia Canal

The Caspian Sea is a geographic anomaly. Fed by the waters of the Volga River basin, it has no outlet—its waters slowly evaporate in the stark heat of Central Asia’s deserts. For centuries, the only link to the oceans was via a laborious land portage between the Don and Volga rivers to enable vessels to reach the Black Sea. With the opening of the Volga-Don canal in 1952, the two seas were finally connected, and Russian vessels could navigate the long route up the Volga River, along the canal and down the Don River into the Sea of Azov. This link is part of Russia’s extensive inland waterways, the Unified Deep Water System of European Russia, which connects the Baltic, Black, and Caspian seas.

The strategic utility of this route was demonstrated in May 2018 when three Russian missile ships redeployed from the Caspian to Rostov-on-Don, on the Sea of Azov.¹⁰ In June 2018, two corvettes, the *Grad Sviyazhsk* and *Veliky Ustyug*, also sailed along this route from the Caspian to the Sea of Azov, and on through the Kerch Straits and the Bosphorus and into the Eastern Mediterranean.¹¹

This route is too shallow for larger military craft, and the 13 locks on the Volga-Don Canal make it a time-consuming journey. The Soviets began building an alternative canal route from the Caspian to the Black Sea in the 1980s, but it was never completed. In 2007, President Putin promoted the idea of a direct canal between the Caspian and the Azov seas, commenting that such a canal “would ... give Caspian Sea countries access to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, that is to the World Ocean. [...] This qualitatively changes their geopolitical status and allows them to become maritime powers.”¹²

This project—often dubbed the Eurasia Canal—would run 650–700 kilometers directly from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea, probably using some existing waterways and reservoirs.¹³ The project has lacked financial backing and also faced environmental concerns.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Chinese interest in a trans-Caspian route to compete with the land and sea route that transits Georgia and Azerbaijan may make the route economically viable. At a Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) summit in Sochi on May 14, 2018, President Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan sought to revive the Eurasia Canal project, which would—he claimed—transform Kazakhstan into a maritime power.¹⁵ The Russian Ministry of Defense also reportedly supports the project,

¹⁰ Sergei Ishchenko, “Novaya flotiliya Rossii: Na Azovskoye more nadvigaetsya shtorm s Kaspiya,” *Svobodnaya pressa*, May 29, 2018, <https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/201260>.

¹¹ Joshua Kucera, “Russia Transfers Five Warships Out of Caspian Sea,” *Eurasianet*, June 25, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/russia-transfers-five-warships-out-of-caspian-sea>.

¹² N.S. Bekturganov and A.V. Bolaev, “The Eurasia Canal as a Factor of Economic Prosperity for the Caspian Region,” *Geography, Environment, Sustainability* 10, no. 1, (2017): 33–41.

¹³ Bekturganov and Bolaev, “The Eurasia Canal.”

¹⁴ Paul Goble, “New Hopes for Shorter Caspian-Black Sea Canal Spark Growing Opposition,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 15, no. 118, (August 7, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/new-hopes-for-shorter-caspian-black-sea-canal-spark-growing-opposition>.

¹⁵ “Eurasia Canal: A Megaproject to Be Revived,” *Invest Foresight*, August 20, 2018, <https://investforesight.com/eurasia-canal-a-megaproject-to-be-revived>.

in light of the increasing security links between the Caspian and Russia's wider maritime strategy in the Azov and Black seas.¹⁶

Sea of Azov

Emerging from the mouth of the Don River, Russian warships transiting from the Caspian enter the Sea of Azov, a body of water legally shared by Ukraine and Russia according to a 2003 agreement. Although the international community began paying attention to the conflict around the Sea of Azov only after 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, Russia had been seeking to gain more control over the sea since at least 2003, when the two sides were involved in a dispute over the ownership of Tuzla Island in the Kerch Strait. A 2003 agreement—the Treaty on Cooperation in the Use of the Azov Sea and the Kerch Strait—was skewed in Russia's favor, because it confirmed Russia's contention that Azov was an internal sea of Russia and Ukraine and was effectively closed to third countries, but the agreement left many key issues unresolved.¹⁷

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Sea of Azov has become strategically critical for Russia because it could be used to isolate the Crimean peninsula from the Russian mainland in case of military conflict; in response, the Russian navy has rapidly built up its naval capacity in Rostov-on-Don, and Russia has built new infrastructure, above all the Crimean Bridge, a \$6 billion road and rail link between Crimea and the Russian mainland.¹⁸ The bridge has effectively transformed the geography of the sea by consolidating Russian control over both the Kerch Strait and consequently the Sea of Azov and provoking numerous incidents between Russian and Ukrainian ships.

A dangerous clash in November 2018 between Russian and Ukrainian naval vessels resulted in Russian forces firing on Ukrainian ships in international waters and detaining 24 sailors.¹⁹ Since then, although the political rhetoric has remained confrontational, Russia and Ukraine have avoided further incidents. In late February 2019, the two sides even signed a protocol on fishing in the Sea of Azov, committing themselves to an agreed division of fishing quota while also agreeing not to seize each other's ships.²⁰ But Azov remains a hot spot for potentially dangerous clashes in the future: Moscow rejected proposals to extend the mandate of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's monitoring mission in Donbas to the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait.²¹ Russia continues a military build-up in the Sea of Azov and will maintain its unilateral regulation of the Kerch Strait, which was highlighted as a key goal in Russia's 2015

¹⁶ Paul Goble, "Moscow Plans to Expand Canal System Between Caspian and Azov Seas," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 42, March 26, 2019.

¹⁷ Ridvan Bari Urcosta, "Russia's Strategic Considerations on the Sea of Azov," Warsaw Institute, March 12, 2018.

¹⁸ Urcosta, "Russia's Strategic Considerations."

¹⁹ "Russia Fires On and Seizes Ukrainian Ships Near Annexed Crimea," Reuters, November 25, 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-ukraine-crisis-russia/russia-fires-on-and-seizes-ukrainian-ships-near-annexed-crimea-idUKKCN1NU0DY>.

²⁰ Ivan Schwartz, "Moskva i Kiev podelili rybu v Azovskom more," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, February 28, 2019, http://www.ng.ru/economics/2019-02-28/4_7521_azov.html.

²¹ Tatyana Ivzhenko, "Kiev mozhnet dat' prikaz na 'kerchenskiy proryv,'" *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, February 17, 2019, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2019-02-17/1_7510_kiev.html.

Maritime Doctrine. Consequently, the Sea of Azov is rapidly also becoming a closed sea, dominated by the Russian navy, with Ukraine's use of its waters effectively regulated by Russia.

Black Sea

The annexation of Crimea transformed Russia's previously weak strategic position in the Black Sea. It ended the restrictions imposed by Ukraine on modernization of the Black Sea Fleet and the fleet's main harbor at Sevastopol. It ensured Russian *de facto* control over the Kerch Strait and, consequently, the Sea of Azov and it expanded Russia's *de facto* shoreline on the Black Sea from 421 kilometers to 1,200 kilometers, adding almost 500 kilometers of coastline in the Azov Sea.²² Although these territorial annexations are not recognized in international law, Russia has swiftly moved to consolidate control through a militarization of the Crimean peninsula and a buildup of its Black Sea Fleet.

The Black Sea Fleet was founded in 1784 as the "guarantor of the security of the southern borders of the Fatherland," but it could hardly fulfill that role in the early 21st century after years of neglect by a cash-strapped Russian state. Before the 2010s, Turkey, not Russia, had the largest fleet in the sea, boasting 14 submarines to Russia's one and a combined tonnage of 97,000, compared with 63,000 for the Black Sea Fleet.²³ In 2010, however, Russia announced a complete overhaul of the fleet, adding six new submarines and modernized warships. Russia has also built up its defense of the Crimean peninsula, including an expanded Sevastopol naval base, a new military garrison, an aviation division, sophisticated radar systems, and three divisions of coastal missile anti-air and anti-ship missile systems.²⁴ According to Russian Minister of Defense Shoygu, "a unique multi-purpose military unit has been created in the peninsula and it is constantly being strengthened. Its modern high-tech weapon systems do not leave a single chance to a potential enemy who dares to attack this primordial Russian territory."²⁵

This military buildup all adds up to what analyst Michael Peterson calls a "counter-navy," which provides Russia with sufficient land-based military installations, together with anti-air and anti-surface missile defenses and fighter aircraft, to dominate much of the Black Sea area.²⁶ According to Peterson, "if Gerasimov was correct in 2016 that Turkey once had the region's dominant navy, then that navy, even with U.S. help, would face a monumentally difficult task in taking on Russia in the Black Sea in 2018."²⁷

Admiral Vladimir Komoyedov, the head of the Russian State Duma Committee for Defense, said in 2016 that the Black Sea "became the Russian Sea in the ninth century and practically

²² Urcosta, "Russia's Strategic Considerations."

²³ International Crisis Group, *Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus*, Report No. 250, June 28, 2018, p. 15, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/250-russia-and-turkey-black-sea-and-south-caucasus>.

²⁴ Sergey Sukhankin, "Russia Pours More Military Hardware into 'Fortress Crimea,'" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 14, no. 147, (November 14, 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-pours-military-hardware-fortress-crimea>.

²⁵ "Ni yedinogo shansa: Shoigu o tom, chto zhdet potentsial'nogo protivnika Kryma," RIA Krym, June 20, 2018, <https://crimea.ria.ru/society/20180620/1114674955.html>.

²⁶ Michael Peterson, "The Naval Power Shift in the Black Sea," *War on the Rocks*, January 9, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/the-naval-power-shift-in-the-black-sea>.

²⁷ Peterson, "The Naval Power Shift."

remained as such until 1991.”²⁸ However historically inaccurate, this nationalist view of Russia’s southern geography supports Moscow’s view that the Black Sea falls within its rightful sphere of influence and that the Black Sea is the “zone of responsibility of [the] Russian Black Sea Fleet.”²⁹ Consequently, the Black Sea is now an area of potential confrontation between NATO vessels (particularly from the United States and United Kingdom) that are exercising freedom of navigation rights in the sea and Russia, which continues to seek its ultimate goal of turning the Black Sea—like the Caspian and Azov seas—into a closed sea, from which foreign vessels would be excluded. Officially, Russia strongly supports the 1936 Montreux Convention, which permits smaller warships from non-Black Sea nations to visit the sea for up to 21 days and allows Russia largely unimpeded access to the Mediterranean. Unofficially, some experts have called for Montreux to be revised to prevent U.S. and British naval vessels from entering the Black Sea.³⁰

Conclusion

Russian strategic shifts are often articulated through new geographical visions. Since 2003, one of the most important shifts in geopolitical thinking in Moscow has been a reorientation of Russia’s strategic focus to its southern flank. The southern strategy has relied heavily on a new maritime strategy, implemented across the three seas of Russia’s south—the Caspian, Azov, and Black seas. As with other Russian strategic shifts, the geopolitical shifts in the south reflect both contemporary challenges and long-standing historical dynamics that are embedded in Russia’s strategic culture, including the importance of access to warm-water ports, and Russia’s historical insistence on a right of access to the Mediterranean through the Turkish Straits. These historical factors are compounded by Russia’s revived influence in the Mediterranean, prompted by its military intervention in Syria, but also reflected in Russian involvement in the Libyan conflict, and in other areas of the Middle East and North Africa. As Russia expands its influence in Central Asia and the Middle East, the three seas are becoming a vital, interlinked military-security zone for Russia and a region of significant challenge for NATO and the West.

²⁸ “Russia Ready to Respond to Any Provocation in Black Sea—Lawmaker,” *TASS*, July 18, 2016, <http://tass.com/politics/875534>.

²⁹ “Russia Ready to Respond.”

³⁰ Paul Goble, “Moscow Mulls Revising Montreux Convention in Response to NATO Presence in Black Sea,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 46 (April 2, 2019); “Peresmotr konvencii Montre po Chernomu moryu stanet kontrpoliticheskim otvetom Zapadu,” *Ekonomika segodnya*, March 30 2019, <https://rueconomics.ru/384828-peresmotr-konvencii-montre-po-chernomu-moryu-stanet-kontrpoliticheskim-otvetom-zapadu>.

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