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Russia, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean *A European Security Perspective*

By Ian Lesser, Özgür Unluhisarcikli, and Pelham Hardie

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Key Takeaways:

- Russia's posture and strategy in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean are the products of historic concerns and aspirations, and new dynamics. Türkiye is a key element in Moscow's regional calculus.
- Moscow has tended to view the two regions as an integrated strategic space. Recent developments, not least the closure of the Straits¹, have broken this traditional linkage.
- In the future, Libya is likely to overtake Syria as a focal point for Russian engagement as Moscow looks to project influence in Africa.
- Russia's engagement around the Mediterranean is strategically and operationally constrained. Once the war in Ukraine ends, Russia will likely emphasize priorities elsewhere as it reconstitutes its military. The country's southern posture is likely to have only a marginal effect on the overall "correlation of forces" in Europe.

Executive Summary

This analysis explores the evolving nature of Russia's interests and priorities in areas to the country's south, and the implications of this for European security. It is a medium-term assessment, identifying conditions under which Russia's engagement and ability to project power around the Black Sea and the Mediterranean may wax or wane over the next 3-5 years, and the consequences of that for European security.

Moscow has several objectives in the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions including: 1) bolstering security in the Black Sea itself; 2) preserving its presence in Syria and Libya; 3) securing its lines of communication and the ability to project power and influence to North Africa, the Sahel, and beyond; and 4) maintaining a stable relationship with Türkiye, one that may be characterized as "competitive cooperation".

Russia has traditionally seen the wider Black Sea-Mediterranean region as an integrated strategic space. Developments in recent years, above all the closure of the Straits, have disrupted this linkage. Moscow will, however, seek to consolidate and perhaps expand its activities in Libya and adjacent regions. Indeed, Libya is set to overtake Syria as a focal point for Russian engagement as the Kremlin looks to project influence in Africa. Overall, Russia has adopted an indirect approach, consistent with its limited capabilities, that focuses on support for friendly regimes and factions, arms transfers, the use of irregular forces, information operations, and commercial activities.

Russia's freedom of action and capacity for power projection in the Black Sea-Mediterranean region are highly constrained. Once the conflict in Ukraine ends, analysts suggest that Russia is more likely to focus the reconstitution of its military on strategic priorities elsewhere, from the Baltic Sea to the Western theater, and even in the Far East. New Russian investments in political-military initiatives around the Mediterranean would likely have only a marginal effect on Russia's overall ability to project power in Europe. The Mediterranean will remain a symbolically important theater for Russian engagement on the political level at a time of considerable flux in North-South relations.

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Introduction²

Russia's posture and strategy in the wider Black Sea-Mediterranean region are the products of historic aspirations, enduring concerns, and new dynamics. This analysis explores the evolving nature of Russia's interests and priorities in areas to the country's south, and the implications for European security. It is a medium-term assessment, exploring conditions under which Russia's engagement and ability to project power around the Black Sea and the Mediterranean may wax or wane over the next 3-5 years, and the consequences of that for European security. The analysis suggests that Russian freedom of action and capacity for power projection in the Black Sea-Mediterranean region is highly constrained. The ability of developments there to broadly influence the overall trajectory of Russia-NATO competition is also found to be limited, with few opportunities for Russia to use its modest southern posture to threaten European security in existential ways. Given the war in Ukraine, Moscow's engagement in the Mediterranean will remain modest as interests there remain subordinate to those elsewhere.

Old Anxieties, Evolving Aspirations

Even at the height of the Soviet Union's Cold War-era presence and regional engagement, the Kremlin arguably had only a modest ability³ to project military power decisively to the Black Sea-Mediterranean region. Moscow's political engagement was also variable and prone to reversals, most notably the collapse of the bilateral relationship with Egypt in the wake of the 1973 Yom Kippur war.

For geographic reasons, Russia has traditionally seen its southward interests and presence as a strategic continuum⁴ stretching outward from the Black Sea. Russia's strategic culture,⁵ shaped by a sense of vulnerability and its persistent perception of Western encroachment,⁶ drives it to seek a sphere of influence in surrounding regions. In this context, projecting power through the Black Sea into the Mediterranean serves the defensive purpose⁷ of protecting and stabilizing its southern flank. The close nexus between the two continues to be central to this approach. In addition, Russia's presence further south, in North Africa and the Sahel, is logistically dependent on this Black Sea-Mediterranean connection.

Russian engagement with the wider Mediterranean region is historic, but it is also variable and closely bound up with Moscow's own sense of security exposure and the quest for buffer zones.⁸ Policy and presence in this southern near-abroad has also been demanding in terms of forces and strategy. Perhaps for this reason, Russia's southern strategy has flourished when the country is strong and receded in times of weakness and rising threats from other quarters.⁹

The war in Ukraine has made the Black Sea itself a key theater for Russian forces.¹⁰ The conflict has also imposed operational and political constraints on the Kremlin's ability to project military power southward and, above all, to shift its limited naval forces from one theater to another. Before 2022, the Syrian port of Tartus¹¹ had been the backbone of Russian naval power in the Levant, but the port's current status, and that of Russia's air base at Khmeimim, is uncertain. The potential loss of that base and others in Syria, particularly the port of Tartus, combined with restricted access through the Strait, compromises Moscow's ability to project naval power into the eastern Mediterranean and beyond. Russian leaders expected this challenge, and as part of their preparations for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, several important ships were transferred to the Black Sea.¹²

Fear of encirclement and the desire to keep perceived security threats away from Russia's borders are mainstays of the country's strategic thought and national identity.¹³ This chronic anxiety has influenced Russian geopolitical strategy since the fall of the Soviet Union. The Kremlin generally aims to prop up in neighboring states friendly or pliable governments willing to comply with its demands.¹⁴

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Russia has a variety of political and soft tools it uses to maintain this immediate buffer zone, but it has demonstrated a willingness to resort to force when these tools fail.¹⁵ Examples of this include the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, and support for the Moldovan breakaway region of Transnistria. Russia has also sought to keep neighboring states from strengthening their own security through ties to international organizations.¹⁶

In the Middle East, the Kremlin saw another opportunity in the crisis that struck the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad in the early 2010s. By maintaining a military presence south of the Black Sea in Syria, Russia sought to gain an additional buffer far from its borders. In essence, support for the besieged Syrian regime offered an opportunity to secure another compliant neighbor further afield. Moscow was able to build on decades of close ties to Damascus to accomplish this.

The Russian search for Mediterranean access and influence builds on long experience. Cold War geopolitics encouraged the Soviet interest in undermining the West's position in the Middle East, North Africa, and the "Global South" in general. The opportunities for this were evident in the period of decolonization and "anti-imperial" revolutions, notably in Egypt and Algeria. Moscow looked to exploit differences between Washington on one hand, and London and Paris on the other. Seizing the opportunity, the Soviet Union established a base at Tartus and gained access to the Egyptian ports of Mersa Matruh, Port Said, and Alexandria.¹⁷ From the late 1960s, and with the addition of the necessary bases to support power projection in the Mediterranean, the Russian navy's Fifth Squadron assumed greater importance for Soviet military planners. It was at this time that Moscow deployed, on average, 40 to 55 ships in the Mediterranean, a number that could rise to around 80 in times of crisis.¹⁸ With these deployments, the linkage between the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea became critical for military planners who would regularly move vessels between the two theaters.¹⁹

Alongside the increased presence of its vessels, the Soviet Union built a significant network of contacts²⁰ in Middle Eastern and North African governments. Members of the leadership cadres in post-colonial Algeria, and in Syria during the Bashar and Hafez al-Assad regimes,²¹ spent time in Russia for education or military training.²² These connections spawned a web of people in both Arab nations vested in the relationship with Moscow, some with direct family ties to the countries' leadership. With the passage of time, and changing military-to-military ties, these Kremlin-oriented cadres are passing from the scene. From Moscow's perspective, the fall of the al-Assad regime underscores this reality, despite continued efforts to establish effective diplomatic contacts with the al-Sharaa government.

Russia's Strategic Objectives and Constraints

Beyond persistent Kremlin interest in pushing perceived threats away from its southern periphery, Moscow, analysts underscore, has traditionally viewed the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions as an integrated space²³ in political and operational terms. But, as noted above, Russia's activism here has ebbed and flowed over time. So, too, has its perception of countries to its south as sources of opportunity and risk.

In recent years, Moscow has seen its security presence in Syria, Libya, and the Sahel as a vehicle for reasserting its influence after decades of retrenchment. After the Soviet Union's fall, Russia maintained a minimal presence in Syria. That changed dramatically in 2015, in part through significant infrastructure investment. With the war in Ukraine, the fall of the al-Assad regime, and an embattled regime in Tehran, the Kremlin today is arguably in a less ambitious mode in terms of power projection in the Mediterranean region. But it is seeking to preserve its position and complicate US and European policy where it can.

Moscow has several objectives in the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions. The first objective concerns bolstering security in the Black Sea itself, which has been a key theater of operations, especially given the war in

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Ukraine. The body of water has also been a challenging environment²⁴ for conventional Russian naval operations since the Kremlin's maritime forces are largely unable to operate outside a limited area in the eastern part of the sea. Russia's loss of its cruiser Moskva in April 2022 dramatically illustrates the Kremlin's predicament.²⁵

Türkiye's closure of the Straits to military vessels that year—implemented pursuant to Article 19 of the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits—also significantly constrains Russia's operational flexibility while hostilities persist. Under the provision, belligerent powers are prohibited from moving warships through the Strait, except for inbound vessels with a home base on the Black Sea. This effectively limits Russia's ability to reinforce its naval presence there and to redeploy its vessels to safer waters.

Once the Strait was closed, the Moskva—heavily armed²⁶ with Vulcan anti-ship missiles, a three-layered air and anti-missile defense system, antisubmarine torpedoes, and long-range targeting sensors—became Russia's main asset²⁷ for supporting its naval operations to project power ashore from the Black Sea. The loss of this ship reduced Moscow's ability²⁸ to mount amphibious and naval operations in support of its war aims.

The traditional coupling of the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions has been complicated and perhaps broken now that the former is a theater of war and an operational priority for Russian planners. That makes the Mediterranean primarily a sphere for Russian political influence,²⁹ information operations,³⁰ and activities driven by commercial interest,³¹ from arms sales to mercenary deployments.³² As a strategic priority, it ranks well behind the Ukraine/Black Sea theater, the Far East, the High North, the Baltic, and the western flank bordering Europe.³³ Russia could afford to devote more attention to bolstering its power and influence around the Mediterranean when the central balance with NATO was perceived as stable. This, however, is no longer the case.

Russian strategists are keenly aware that recent decades have seen a steady consolidation of the US and NATO posture in southern Europe and the Mediterranean. Much of the alliance's air and missile defense capability is afloat in the Mediterranean or near the Black Sea. The deepening of bilateral US-Greek security cooperation³⁴ and the substantial American naval presence at Suda Bay on Crete stands in sharp contrast to the erosion of the Russian posture in the Mediterranean, most notably since the transfer of most remaining Russian assets to the Black Sea in 2022.³⁵ The establishment, within the Turkish Sixth Corps in Adana, of a NATO Multinational Corps Headquarters (MNC-TUR), and the planned creation, by Türkiye and partner states, of a multinational naval component command at the entrance to the Strait that is part of the Multinational Force Ukraine (MNF-U),³⁶ is likely to heighten Russian concerns over the erosion of its political and military position in the Black Sea and the broader southern region. The Russian embassy in Ankara has already expressed such a concern, posting on its Facebook page that “Russia attributes great importance to the Montreux Convention and supports its implementation by all parties.”³⁷ Additionally, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has said that “Turkish colleagues have repeatedly told us that, as custodians of the Montreux Convention, they will strictly adhere to its provisions.”³⁸ The Turkish Ministry of Defense, for its part, has issued a statement noting that “all work is conducted in accordance with the Montreux Convention.”³⁹ The agreement is clearly a focal point for Moscow and Ankara. The key issue is military access to the Strait once hostilities between Russia and Ukraine end.

Moscow's second objective in the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions is preserving its presence in Syria and Libya. Having built and maintained a significant military presence in both countries, Russia has a vested interest in keeping it. To abandon its naval and air establishment in Syria would severely compromise the ability to play a role in shaping the security environment in a country of long-standing Russian interest. Disengagement would leave the field clear to others, including Türkiye, Israel, and the United States. It would also reduce Russia's already tenuous ability to project and sustain a naval and air presence in the Mediterranean. The loss of a security foothold in Syria would also likely be seen as a blow to Russian prestige. For these political and operational reasons, retention of the naval base at Tartus (of limited utility while the Straits remain closed) and the much more useful airbase at Khmeimim is important. Russia's ability to retain access to these facilities if the new

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regime in Damascus adopts a less favorable position, however, is uncertain, especially as the Kremlin may face an increasing force-protection problem there. But the new Syrian regime currently has little incentive to break with Moscow, and the West is not pressuring Damascus to do so. In addition, the existing base lease agreement has been suspended but not cancelled. Damascus presumably has renegotiations in mind. During a meeting with Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin in Moscow in January 2026, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa implied this by saying that his country would respect past agreements.⁴⁰ But the medium-term outlook is less clear and potentially less favorable for Russia.

Moscow's third objective, even when facing higher priorities elsewhere, is securing its lines of communication and the ability to project power and influence to North Africa, the Sahel, and beyond.⁴¹ In this regard, the Russian military presence in Libya is critical and closely linked to Moscow's continuing support for the unrecognized (by the West) government of Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army. Russia also operates an informal network of six primary airfields in eastern Libya and port facilities at Tobruk and Benghazi.⁴² These sites support a mix of air operations, air defense, and logistics, including for Russia's "Africa Corps", successor to the Wagner Group. This presence facilitates its power projection and support for local allies across a wide region, from Sudan to Central Africa.

Russian observers and officials view their country's southern engagement as part of its global role, a contribution to its prestige and influence, and an indicator of global influence.⁴³ More tangibly, Russia's political and military presence leads to revenue sources including arms sales and mercenary remittances.⁴⁴ These commercial ties also provide ample scope for corruption and malign financing. For all these reasons, Russia's role in the Mediterranean is unlikely to unravel entirely, even in the face of more pressing concerns elsewhere.

A fourth Russian objective is maintaining a stable relationship with Türkiye, one that may be characterized as "competitive cooperation", especially on trade and energy. But such cooperation does not guarantee geopolitical accommodation. The two countries supported opposing sides in the conflicts in Libya, the South Caucasus and Syria, even while engaging in a rapprochement between 2016 and 2023.⁴⁵

The management of Moscow's multifaceted relationship with Ankara has significant implications for Russia's position in the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions. Türkiye controls passage between the two and, as noted above, has always been punctilious about implementing the provisions of the Montreux Convention. But it would be Ankara's decision, if tempted⁴⁶ by an effective ceasefire in Ukraine, to reopen the Strait to military vessels. The Kremlin also has an interest in being able to overfly Turkish territory so that it can support its operations in Syria and Libya. Türkiye announced in 2022 the closure of its airspace to Russian aircraft flying to Syria, but it is unclear if this policy was ever implemented.⁴⁷

The traditional pillars of Türkiye's grand strategy, influenced by geography and history, include balancing ties to the world's great powers while maintaining a strong connection to the West.⁴⁸ Türkiye has been a NATO ally since 1952 and an EU candidate country since 1999, but neither has prevented competitive cooperation with Russia. The two countries typically draw on each other when they feel excluded by the West and shift to competition when one, usually Türkiye, draws closer to the West. They also compartmentalize their relations, cooperating on areas such as trade and energy (where Moscow has considerable leverage) while competing geopolitically.

The relationship between Ankara and Moscow had peaked when the latter invaded Ukraine. The close ties were reflected in Türkiye's procurement of Russia's advanced S-400 air defense system and the start of construction of

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a Russian nuclear power plant in Türkiye.⁴⁹ But since then Ankara has opted for a policy of relative equidistance between Moscow and Kyiv. The Turks support Ukraine in political and military terms without being overtly hostile to Russia.⁵⁰ Substantial energy trade and shared commercial interests are one reason for this balancing act, as is the shared belief that both countries^{51,52} should shape Black Sea security. Yet Türkiye's NATO membership and the strength of its concerns about sovereignty and security point to an underlying strategic competition with Russia. This was evident in Ankara's decision to shoot down a Russian fighter-bomber after its brief incursion into Turkish territory along the Syrian border in 2015.⁵³

In the future, despite these stresses, Moscow is likely to continue to see relations with Ankara as important to its strategic calculus regarding Europe and the Middle East. The Kremlin is also likely to watch for signs that Ankara is implementing the Montreux Convention selectively, with a bias toward its NATO allies, even if that has not happened so far.

Russia's Black Sea Posture

Russia's approach to the Black Sea reflects a strategy that combines geopolitical ambition with military and economic instruments. Ideally, Moscow would aspire to dominate the basin and reassert a sphere of influence over former Soviet states and their neighbors; limit or roll back Western and NATO influence in the region; project maritime power in the Mediterranean, Middle East, and the Caucasus; and exploit the Black Sea for energy, grain exports, and economic leverage.⁵⁴

Russia is able to pursue these goals given its reinforced, if exposed, military footprint in Crimea and its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities in the Black Sea, which are primarily based in Crimea and center on S-400 air defense, Bastion-P coastal defense, Iskander-M missiles, and Kalibr cruise missiles.⁵⁵ These assets, supported by over-the-horizon radars, allow for regional power projection that covers most of the Black Sea. The Kremlin also has a demonstrated capacity to employ hybrid tools such as disinformation, cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, political interference, and paramilitary actions to secure its goals.⁵⁶ Yet these instruments are increasingly offset by structural and operational constraints. Using asymmetric tactics, including the innovative use of unmanned surface vessels (USVs), Ukraine has degraded Russia's Black Sea fleet and forced it to withdraw east to Novorossiysk. This limits Moscow's control of the regional maritime domain. Moreover, Russia's A2/AD exclusion zones, or "bubbles", in the Black Sea are not insurmountable and do not negate NATO's regional defenses.⁵⁷

Looking ahead, China can be expected to provide limited, indirect support to Russia in the form of technology,⁵⁸ finance, and critical materials,⁵⁹ as Beijing has done throughout the conflict. But Moscow will still face constraints rebuilding its Black Sea fleet. These constraints, including the likelihood of ongoing Western sanctions, will hinder the Kremlin's ability to replace its losses with conventional warships (international contracts to purchase them have long been abandoned).⁶⁰ Russia's room for maneuver in the Black Sea, however, is foremost limited by Türkiye's control of the Strait, particularly when conflict breaks out.⁶¹

A Shifting Mediterranean Posture

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Even during the height of the Cold War, NATO analysts tended to see the Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean as a secondary security challenge. In a sense, Moscow's perspective mirrored the alliance's own approach to a region long seen as subordinate to other theaters. But the disparity between NATO's and the Kremlin's capabilities there is far more obvious today. Russia reconstituted its Mediterranean naval task force in 2013, and it now comprises just a few elements drawn from other fleets on a rotational basis.⁶² Even at its peak between 2020 and 2022, Russia's Fifth Operational squadron included only two diesel electric submarines, one or two nuclear boats, and perhaps 3-5 larger surface combatants.⁶³

Russia's current naval presence in the Mediterranean is much reduced and essentially limited to ship escorts and port calls. Even more than its Cold War predecessor, the squadron suffers from a lack of anchorages and repair facilities for sustained operations.⁶⁴ The country's ships have access to Alexandria, Algiers, Mers-el Kébir, Oran, Tobruk, and Benghazi, but none offers facilities that can support a sustained Mediterranean presence. Repair facilities in Malta and Cyprus are no longer open to Russian vessels. The modest Russian naval presence has been most useful to "show the flag" and for small exercises with friendly navies, including occasionally Iran and China.⁶⁵

Russia hardly figures in the current Mediterranean naval balance. NATO's southern European naval and air forces are far greater in number and have better capacity for sustained operations, even before considering the US Sixth Fleet and other forces, such as Israel's. The result is that Moscow's Mediterranean presence is centered increasingly on extensive but informal access in North Africa rather than in Syria.⁶⁶

Other Kremlin assets may be more relevant to the region's military balance. Russia has deployed capable area-denial systems to Syria and Libya. S-300, S-400, and other air defense assets have been installed at Khmeimim and Tartus. But many of these systems have reportedly now been moved to the Ukraine theater⁶⁷ or to Libya,⁶⁸ and the remaining assets are older or less capable short-range systems. Proxy forces in Libya or elsewhere can still pose a drone and cruise missile threat in the eastern Mediterranean, as demonstrated by the recent drone strike on the British base in Cyprus. But developments on that front depend heavily on the evolution of Iranian-backed groups in Lebanon, relations between Moscow and Tehran, and other issues beyond the scope of this analysis.

A Legacy Theater?

It is tempting to conclude that Russia's security engagement around the Mediterranean is in sustained decline. Moscow's traditional conception of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean as an integrated strategic space has been dealt a variety of blows, including operational losses in the former, the closure of the Strait, the fall of the al-Assad regime, and subsequent uncertainty about the future of bases in Syria. But Russia is recalibrating its Mediterranean strategy and using Libya as a new strategic hub.⁶⁹ It is transferring military equipment there from Syria to support friendly Libyan forces and to establish a logistical base for operations in Africa.⁷⁰ With a ceasefire in or end to the Ukraine war, Russia could regain much of its lost freedom of action, and its Black Sea-Mediterranean nexus could be restored. The Kremlin could then make more use of its investment in Libyan bases given the lifting of naval transit restrictions in the Strait and a reversal of the ban on overflying Türkiye. This analysis does not examine the outlook for Russian engagement in Africa as a whole. But mounting pressure on Russia-backed regimes (and the Africa Corps itself) from jihadist insurgents could throw into question the utility of Libya as a hub for Russian power projection to the Sahel.

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Politically, as one interlocutor has suggested, Russia prefers “balanced chaos” in contested parts of the Middle East, including the Levant, Libya, and adjacent parts of the Sahel. It need not “win” there, but it does not want to lose. Analysts tend to agree that Moscow is looking to keep the United States and its Western partners on edge in southern Mediterranean affairs, even if priorities elsewhere limit Russian strategic investments there and further south.

Overall Observations and Conclusions

This analysis suggests that Russia’s presence and behavior in the South over the next 3-5 years is unlikely to have more than marginal consequences for the overall “correlation of forces” in European security. Long-standing Russian interests will persist, alongside a modest degree of engagement consistent with more pressing strategic priorities elsewhere. Beyond this overall observation, this analysis offers five specific findings:

- Russia has traditionally seen the wider Black Sea-Mediterranean region as an integrated strategic space. Developments in recent years have broken the link between the two regions. The Black Sea is now a critical part of Russia’s interests and strategy in the war with Ukraine, and the conflict itself is the country’s top strategic priority. The Kremlin almost certainly sees broader aims in the Mediterranean and further south as subordinate to the ongoing war and the country’s core security interests in Europe.
- Russia’s traditional view of the Mediterranean as a source of risk and opportunity will likely persist. But new investment in the country’s presence there is unlikely in the foreseeable future as attention is diverted to Ukraine. The Kremlin will, however, seek to consolidate and perhaps expand its activities in Libya and adjacent regions. Indeed, Libya is set to overtake Syria as a focal point for Russian engagement as the Kremlin looks to project influence in Africa.
- Russia’s southern engagement in the Mediterranean and the Middle East and North Africa is constrained. For now, Moscow does not appear to want to pose a major challenge to Western power across the region as a whole. Russian engagement is configured for an indirect approach, consistent with its limited capabilities, and focuses on support for friendly regimes and political factions, arms transfers, the use of irregular forces, information operations, and commercial activities. Revenue from defense sales and raw material concessions figure prominently in Moscow’s approach.
- Türkiye is a key element in Russia’s Black Sea and Mediterranean calculus. The Kremlin will look to protect its economic interests there and, where possible, encourage a sense of security condominium with Ankara. Russian strategists expect that an eventual end to hostilities in Ukraine will lead to a reopening of the Strait to Russian naval vessels. But recent operational experience will likely discourage a return to large-scale Russian surface deployments in the Black Sea.
- Once the conflict in Ukraine ends, assuming sufficient resources are available, Russia is more likely to focus its military reconstitution on strategic priorities elsewhere, from the Baltic Sea to the Western theater and even in the Far East. New Russian investments in political-military initiatives around the Mediterranean would likely have only a marginal effect on Russia’s overall ability to project power in Europe. Moscow will not abandon the region, but it will look to remain engaged in a modest but scalable fashion that can be enhanced if conditions permit. The Mediterranean will remain a symbolically important theater for Russian engagement at the political level at a time of considerable flux in North-South relations.

The views expressed herein are those solely of the author(s). GMF as an institution does not take positions.

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Endnotes

¹ Within the framework of this analysis, “the Straits” refers to the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, which connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean via the Sea of Marmara.

² This analysis incorporates observations from an online roundtable discussion with over 20 leading experts on Russian foreign and security policy held on March 12, 2026. The conversation was held under the Chatham House rule. The authors are grateful for the valuable contributions of participants.

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⁵ Denys Yurchenko, “Russian Strategic Culture and the War in Ukraine”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 2, 2024. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/07/russian-strategic-culture-and-the-war-in-ukraine/>

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¹⁰ Max Bergmann, “What Could Come Next? Assessing the Putin Regime’s Stability and Western Policy Options”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 20, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-could-come-next-assessing-putin-regimes-stability-and-western-policy-options>

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¹² Raul (Pete) Pedrozo, “Closing the Turkish Straits in Times of War”, International Law Studies, Vol. 99, 2022, pp. 517–520. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/ils/vol99/iss1/19>

¹³ Denys Yurchenko, “Russian Strategic Culture and the War in Ukraine”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 2024. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/07/russian-strategic-culture-and-the-war-in-ukraine/>

¹⁴ Alexander Cooley, “Whose Rules, Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in Post-Soviet States”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017, p. 3. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/6302017_AlexanderCooley_

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¹⁵ Ibid.

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