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*The Maritime Doctrine of 2015 and its effect on  
the Russian Black Sea strategy*

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This article will try to analyse the content of the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation, its founding principles and their implementation.

The Black Sea, being a proximity sea, represents an area of great interest for the Russian Federation, as indeed clearly confirmed by the Maritime Doctrine of 2015, which underlines precisely the specific importance of coastal areas for the Russian Federation. The coastal areas worth vigilant attention for the Russian Federation are the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov, the Caspian Sea, the Baltic and the Arctic. The Black Sea, besides being one of the most important basins, is also strategically attainable as its control does not necessarily entail the construction of a large fleet of oceanic vessels capable of competing with the US Navy; an undertaking that would go beyond the current investment possibilities of the Russian Federation.

The emphasis is subsequently on the deployment of light and swift units, capable of carrying out a lethal high precision missile attack against enemy vessels, supplemented by substantial EW (Electronic Warfare) capabilities. That said, Western intelligence estimates assess the Black Sea Fleet being at 25% of its full desirable operational level: e.g. amphibious units are just two over a class of six envisaged vessels. On the defensive side, minelaying is a good compensating factor representing a serious threat in conflict and an effective interdiction to commercial traffic in the basin.

The difference between the programmatic Maritime Doctrine of 2015 and its previous version, dating back to the early 2000s, is that the new document is well structured and its future aims clearly indicated: in order to keep a thalassocracy in the Black Sea, the Russian Navy has to eclipse the Turkish naval forces, formerly among the strongest in the area.

### ***A sea denied of its international jurisdiction***

The stress on sovereignty and the substantial invalidation of international legislation supposedly in contrast with the Russian Constitution, pointedly highlighted in its upcoming revision, risks to thwart the work of International Courts, making it legally ineffectual or utterly useless.

It is tantamount weakening courts like those in The Hague (International Court of Justice), in Hamburg (International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea) or Stockholm (International Court of Arbitration at the Chamber of Commerce), that are now discussing Ukraine's complaints vis-à-vis a Russian encroaching on the continental shelf. If Moscow succeeds in stripping these valuable energy assets, Ukraine would probably stumble into a severe and irrecoverable financial crisis or suffer a

serious loss in financial and political credibility in her dealings with generous donors like the International Monetary Fund or the European Union.

In a different energy price environment (by end of April, prices have collapsed to a historical low compared even to mid-Twentieth century levels), one could imagine to attract strong foreign investors in the oil rich Ukrainian continental shelf (itself part of a national Exclusive Economic Zone – EEZ). These stakeholders could put additional political pressure, safeguarding indirectly Ukrainian extraction rights in the areas bordering Crimea, an annexation never recognised by the international community and therefore illegal according to international laws.

The real problem regarding Ukrainian energy rights in the Black Sea and Azov Sea is that these maritime basins are under UNCLOS direct supervision and jurisdiction, but Moscow's authorities argue that the Russian Constitution trumps international legislation (a position reminiscent the one of Germany regarding European legislations) precisely because the legal status of Crimea has been changed by the annexation. In the medium and long run, this might provoke very serious international crisis that nobody would really want.

This is one of the points that the 2015 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation strongly underlines and therefore one of the more contentious points. It is necessary to highlight that, in case of denial of the UNCLOS<sup>1</sup> or even of the freedom of navigation on the high seas as recognised by the Convention on the High Seas (1958), Russia might also resort to its veto capacity at the UN, flanked in this by its allies and clients and, above all, by China that might find its self-interest in helping Russia on this issue for at least two reasons. Firstly, it would not only block Ukraine's legitimate navigation or extraction rights but also NATO's advancement or encroachment into the Black Sea. Secondly, this issue could advantageously apply to China's eventual take-over of Taiwan or any island in the South China Sea as it constitutes or, better, might constitute a juridical precedent, if Russia succeeds in winning the match on this very contentious issue. At present, this does not appear to be the case even if we consider the ratio of forces, (60% of the overall population presumably agreed to Crimea's annexation to Russia but Ukrainians and Tatars did not), as the legal quorum is still missing. In the Russian Maritime Doctrine and other relevant documents

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there is strong emphasis on the strengthening of Russian sovereignty, but also on collaboration with neighbouring states in the framework of international law.

This is a highly contradictory statement as it is not possible to have both of them at the same time. Because of this, which hints at an inherent and unresolved tension between declaratory statements, political behaviour and political realities in the Maritime Doctrine and other relevant documents. The political truth is that Russia prefers of course allied states or client states, subservient states, (пояс дружественных государств) and the Ukraine crisis stems from this Russian geopolitical framing of the area vis-à-vis NATO. Therefore the solution to this conundrum is either a very difficult (though not impossible) compromise to be reached with concessions from both sides or a covert and overt competition for the dominance over the post-Soviet space.

### ***Strategic and security reasons of the importance of the Black Sea for the Russian Federation***

The new Foreign Policy Concept duly pinpoints and strongly highlights Russia's drive in the construction of a multipolar world and namely designates NATO and the USA as the main antagonising forces to the achievement of this priority goal.

China's support to Russia might be mainly diplomatic but it could also involve mediation as it is understandable that the pragmatic minded Chinese are not interested in an all-out clash but rather in an advantageous termination of the blooming conflict and in Russia's success or at least in a balanced settlement, the so called Confucian harmony.

Indeed, in case of a major crisis in the Black Sea, China could also support or strengthen Russia's veto and thus block any resolution against Russia that the US and its allies could try to present at the UN. Furthermore, Russia (and China) could also block any UN or OSCE mission in the area without their explicit consent; this is true for Russia especially as an influent OSCE member. Additionally, Russia is trying to convince minorities to give consent to Russian rule in order to gain the international legitimacy of the annexation of Crimea, namely the recognition of its legal status. This issue is of particular concern for the international community that considers the protection of human rights and of minorities a cornerstone of democracy.

The new Maritime Doctrine highlights the manifold aspects that contribute to making the Black Sea strategically important for the Russian Federation:

- 1) Security: the entire southern area of the Russian Federation remains potentially exposed to missile attacks launched from the northern Black Sea by the powerful US navy.
- 2) Protection of the Russian sea lines of communication that, through the Black Sea, reach Turkey, Iran and the whole Middle East with which the Russian Federation is intensifying political, diplomatic and commercial relations, in addition to military collaboration and security dealings.
- 3) The military and strategic projection of the Russian Federation beyond the borders of the Black Sea and more precisely in the eastern Mediterranean, in particular in Syria and Cyprus.
- 4) The protection of energy resources of the Black Sea area that are of fundamental strategic and economic interest for the Russian Federation. In particular, the exploitation of the energy platforms located on the continental shelf adjacent to Crimea, which is causing a legal dispute between the Russian Federation and Ukraine before various international Courts, such as The Hague, for a fair distribution of fossil resources between the two countries. The new Constitution, currently under approval, expressly disregards international laws that are in conflict with the constitutional provisions of the Russian Federation. This could mark a new and dangerous turning point in the difficult and controversial legal dispute between the Russian Federation and Ukraine and, in general, between the Russian Federation and the international community. The crux of the matter is precisely in the text that defines the strengthening of sovereignty as a key concept, in the Constitution but also in the official documentation related to it, not in agreement but at the expense of international legislation. This specific point raises the hypothesis of a probable increase of tension or even of a clash between US/NATO and Russian forces in the Black Sea area.
- 5) The protection of submarine pipelines and possibly of communication networks which lay on the seabed and which, if severed in the midst of conflict, could interrupt the data and voice communications of the Russian Federation or even of Europe.
- 6) The protection and closure of the Black Sea to NATO and US forces and the no access (denial area) as regards to the Caspian Sea, an area of great strategic importance for its numerous energy resources. On this issue, the Russian Federation can count on the explicit or implicit, support of Turkey and of Iran. In fact, the former is jealous of the prerogatives granted by the 1936 Montreux Convention while the latter is interested in preventing NATO and US penetration in the Black Sea basin as it could compromise its energy export

ambitions and, more generally, its regional and continental expansion. For these same reasons, China could also decide to give its diplomatic and, perhaps, strategic military support to the Russian Federation.

Moreover, the division provided by the new Caspian Sea Treaty (or *Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea*) explicitly prohibits coastal states from granting naval military bases to foreign extra-regional powers. The channel that leads from the Caspian Sea into the Sea of Azov, destination of Russian and Kazakh gas and oil production, represents another relevant point.

Given these needs, it becomes clear why the control or hegemony over the Black Sea is a strategic priority for the current Russian leadership. This hegemony could be achieved through a mix of:

- Diplomatic and tactical moves in particular towards Turkey – with which Russia has a hybrid, utilitarian and tactical relationship.
- Threats to the coastal States.
- A series of strategies based on a synergic use of the military, economic and propaganda components aimed at gaining an essential control of the basin in order to ensure communications with the Balkans, the eastern Mediterranean and especially the Middle East and Syria which is identified primarily as an external projection of Russian power. From Russia's strategic perspective, the Black Sea has the specific purpose of protecting trade and ensuring the security of the southern region of the Russian Federation. To achieve this, Russia must maintain a hybrid relationship with Turkey and exercise constant pressure on Ukraine, avoiding, as much as possible, an alliance between the two countries. Such an alliance would be functional to containing Russia through a close, albeit relatively informal, collaboration in the trade, armaments and, to some extent, political sectors that could significantly invalidate Russian dominance in the Black Sea.

The Maritime Doctrine indicates the Navy as a primary instrument to prevent the suffocation or encirclement of Russia's expansive commercial and geopolitical lines aimed at building a polycentric and therefore multipolar world in which the Federation would be one of the determining actors and pivots of future world politics. This concept is also duly stated in the new Foreign Policy Doctrine

of the Russian Federation, hereby stressing that the Black Sea represents a vested interest for the Russian Federation both in terms of defence as in terms of power-projection capabilities. The aim is the strengthening of Russian economy, welfare and, thereof, standing in the world and its possibility to speak on equal terms with the USA, thus assuring Russian security. The main underlying assumption, stemming from the pure Hobbesian and Darwinist perspective that characterises Putin's global vision, is that – if expansion were not to happen – Russia's world status and ensuing security would be, in the end, jeopardised. Furthermore it must be considered the sensitive nexus between internal politics and economic expansion/foreign policy: economic expansion is vital not only for the survival and thriving of Russia as a nation, but also for the survival of the regime that, otherwise, would see the risk of popular dissatisfaction heightened, both in psychological as in economic terms.

The strong antagonism in the harshly embattled Black Sea area stems from Russia's will to be a major world power, a drive that goes beyond the US's power hierarchy conception and view of Russia.

The Black Sea has become a true hot-spot and the rising of high tension is predictable on this testing bench for the ascent or downgrading of supremacy status among Great Powers. It is the epicentre of the so-called "Thucydides trap", in which a relatively declining power like the USA faces both a "resurgent" power like Russia and, although indirectly and covertly, ascending powers like China and, to a much more limited extent, Iran. The whole issue, in the end, revolves around a quest for supremacy among great powers in which the Black Sea represents the hub of their harsh and progressing rivalry, together with the Persian Gulf, the South China Sea and other important bottlenecks for global energy conveyance where the interests of great powers conflict.

For Russia, the Black Sea represents a mean to guarantee security and expand its commercial and political ties with the rest of the world and especially with the Muslim area. It is the mean to escape the encirclement of hostile alliances by enhancing its security over the entire Black Sea, mainly pursued with the assessment of its prerogatives through a dominant military position in the basin. This clearly explains why Russian authorities consider as a threat NATO's presence in the Black Sea, its upholding of international navigation and extraction rights, its surveillance of energy flows and the transformation of the Ukrainian political system.



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