



NATO Foundation
Defense College



***Russia's geopolitical and geoeconomic space:
variables, interactions and war***

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It is clearly visible that an intended Russian hegemony, if it ever will be, over the Black Sea, Azov Sea and Caspian Sea should form the future basis for the geopolitical hegemonisation of the Eurasian landmass (in liaison with China and Iran, but probably in opposition to Kazakhstan) in the sense of the hegemony and dimension of and over the Eurasian space (пространственная гегемония /пространственное измерение) and thus a commercial, political and strategic supremacy over the Eurasian continent. This is conceived to happen through the spatial domination of the great Eurasian spaces; such a space is not only a space considered as a means of projection, as is the case of the US military doctrine, for which is important the flow of goods particularly in an oceanic space. Russia instead, considers important the land mass and the inland seas that lie within it, as is happening between Russia and Iran, who intend to exploit land links and those of inland waters such as the Azov, Caspian and Volga.

In short, the 'spatial dimension' and 'spatial depth' are once again marking the political and geopolitical conception of international relations, while the West has, in general, focussed on technological development and on space understood as a factor of strategic projection and not as a land mass suitable for favouring economic development of an extensive type (рост/подъём экономического развития) within a controlled space, or at least in synergic sharing with allied countries, at least to some extent.

In this case, one can see how Russia, and Eurasian thought going back to Nikolai Trubezkoy, being unable to compete with the West in economic or technological terms because its economy is in a state of technological backwardness (технологическая отсталость), seeks to utilise the elements in which it enjoys a comparative advantage over the West: the military factor and the spatial factor, the latter factor in which it can enjoy the support of valuable allies who have critical relations with the West for many years, worsened by the Iranian nuclear and human rights issue in addition to the long-standing theme of international terrorism financing. All these elements cause a difficulty in the management of Iranian relations with the West, which makes Iran an excellent and functional ally from Moscow's point of view in the Caspian and Persian Gulf area and in the Middle East in general, particularly with regard to the Russian pipeline routes that have been put under check by Western actions.

European Union and Russia the “Wider Black Sea region”

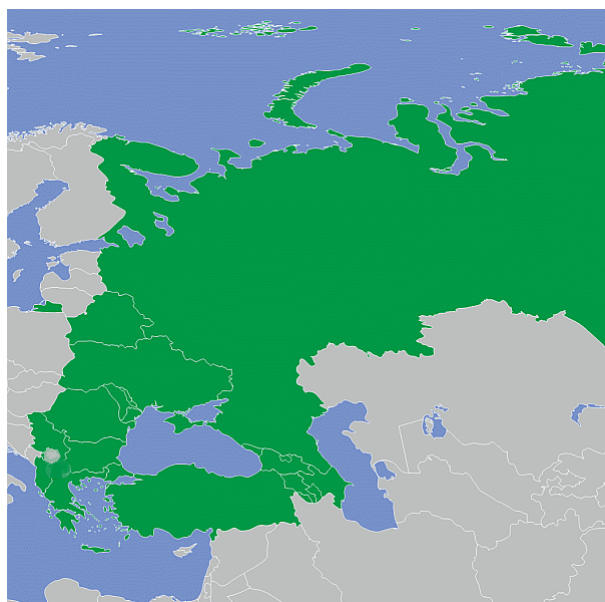
The EU has, on its side, developed an inclusive strategy in the Wider Black Sea region, with variable results. Nevertheless, these mixed accomplishments neither touch and nor solve the problems related to the security structure/architecture of the region, which can only be settled through a very close and difficult dialogue with the states of the region, and thus with Russia, which speaks of a multipolar world and of zones of influence that are substantially one another independent and not directed by a single unipolar power centre, or through the implementation of “hard policies”.

Hence the Caspian Sea (with its considerable known or potential energy resources), together with the Southern Caucasus and the Black Sea, are part of the areas of strategic importance regarding energy supplies to the EU and the West. After 2022 the requirement of diversifying energy supplies has become imperative, in order to avoid the pervasive control of Gazprom. This area, where the EU has been active since many years, should be considered as single complex under the name of ‘Wide Black Sea Area’: it extends from the Caspian Sea to the Balkans because the area is in fluid and organic communication among its various states¹.

The European policies of including the Black Sea and then also the Caspian Sea as an energy supply area for the EU had to some extent a strong impact on its relations with Russia, which did not welcome enlargement/expansion in what it considered its sphere of influence. The EU’s enlargement towards Ukraine in terms of agreements and especially the DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement) may have been decisive vis-à-vis Russia since 2014, because both Russia and the EU have tended to reserve for themselves an ever-growing role in Ukraine. EU’s actions in the Black Sea and Caspian Sea, instead, were more collaborative at an intra-regional level and of technical-administrative nature, yet the result was also negative because they eventually could erode Moscow’s role in the region. Largely financed by the EU, they have been perceived as “soft power policies”, which was adequate, but eluded the problem that only a security architecture in the Black Sea region can guarantee the security of international trade and regional economic development.

¹ Interestingly the NATO Defense College Foundation has already proposed the BBS (Balkan and Black Sea) region as a single complex. due to the commonalities among countries sharing several important issues and challenges (well beyond the Russian aggression) and in view of ongoing or proposed accessions to the EU and/or the NATO. In terms of energy geoeconomic, the inclusion of the Caspian Sea makes sense, but in terms of geopolitics, despite the obvious implications entailed by energy supplies, it would be a step too far (Note of the Editor).

The BSEC factor



A look at the BSEC (Black Sea Economic Cooperation) page within the website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, illustrates quite well the obvious tension existing between hard political, security and economic programmes pursued by different countries. Ukraine, for instance, is more willing, for obvious reasons, to work on the security architecture of the Black Sea region with a view to an ever-increasing collaboration with the EU (Ukraine has been proposed for accession in the medium term). Other allied countries, e.g., Bulgaria, are less willing to

seek a tough confrontation with the Russian Federation, while others, like Türkiye, place more emphasis on the economic and functional dimension of the BSEC as the main organisation in the Black Sea area; less stressed is the aspect of BSEC's political integration with other organisations, which are hardly mentioned.

Another interesting role of the BSEC², through its important infrastructure projects in the transport and energy sectors of the Black Sea area, is played by Serbia (a non littoral member state, like Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece and North Macedonia). Belgrade has a well-known internal and foreign policy, poised between the EU and Russia. On the one hand, especially important is the supply of Russian gas or other Black Sea area sources. Obviously this is one Moscow's atouts vis-à-vis Serbia, because Russian gas is sold to Belgrade at a non-market significantly reduced price; other levers are: the arms sales and political support on the Kosovo issue and the Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Putin's intentions are clearly of destabilising the Western Balkans to prevent, or at least delay, their accession to the Euro-Atlantic community. On the other hand, the EU explicitly threatens to cut Serbia from inclusion in energy and transport corridor projects, if it does not sever relations with Russia.

² One should keep in mind that the BSEC included a rather long and interesting list of observers and partner: countries are mostly non-littoral, <http://www.bsec-organization.org/partners> (Note of the Editor).

Serbia's predicament

Serbia's geopolitics are still in a flux with projects for a gas pipeline passage from the Caspian and Black Sea area and road/river connections to the Black Sea, while the Kosovo issue is still pending and manipulated from Moscow, while other actors are on the ground, such as Türkiye and China. Serbia thus continues for the foreseeable future to sit between two chairs, without being able to choose just one for political and economic expediency, also due to a domestic public opinion where around 50% of the respondents continues to support some sort of alliance with the Russian Federation.

The common Orthodox faith (православная вера) between Russia and Serbia undoubtedly plays a role in the relations between the two countries, but they are mainly based on political and economic interests. In the meantime President Vucic said he did not consider it contradictory to cultivate political and economic relations with the European Union, but also with China and Russia. His problem remains to find a lowest common denominator in a globally crucial area of great complexity and political heterogeneity.



A way out?

In this historical moment, the main and increasingly urgent political problem regards how Russia and Ukraine (with their implicit and explicit allies) can be nudged back into very difficult negotiations to reach a political solution to the war. In future, actors should be willing and able to collectively think once again about a security architecture for the now highly contested Black Sea region or, in English terms, the "Wider Black Sea area".

Until the war, the European Union has reasoned and acted in its eastward expansive phenomenon in an essentially legalistic and bureaucratic manner, as in its beginnings during the 1950s with the pooling or pooling of certain productive assets, as well as based on technological primacy, and only in nuce politically. In 2014 the approach became gradually more political and with the war it has changed.

Russia instead has always preferred an old-style approach more based on political (and military/security) inter-state relations and, above all, based on a conception of geopolitics and space as a founding factor for economic development and for Russia's defence and territorial integrity. The Black Sea has been the place where these two conceptions clashed in terms of interests, functions and values, leading to reciprocal misunderstanding in the past. An acceptable and reasonable post-war settlement needs to address these underlying factors.



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