Geopolitics Quarterly, Volume: 15, No 4, Winter 2020 Scopus

PP 110-121

Russia's Foreign Policy in the Great Mediterranean: Prospects and Constraints

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Received: 14/03/2018 Accepted: 25/09/2019

Abstract

After 2014 Russia is seen powerful enough again to influence the Mediterranean region and change the passive defensive policy, practiced after the USSR's dissolution, for active one. Analysis of attempts to squeeze Russia out of the Black Sea region shows the main strategies elaborated in the early 2000s by the leading US thinktanks.

Authors give the geopolitical landscape of the region: 26 countries are classified into powers (actors) and objects for the realization of national interests of the former. Special attention is paid upon Turkey, Greece, Israel, France, Italy and Spain (with Gibraltar issue). The processes and balances that define Russia's geopolitical interests in the Mediterranean region are seen in interconnection with the intentions of military and political leaders of the region detached on the basis of the geopolitical methodology. A variant of the "Russian balance" is offered as prospective to realize Russia's national interests in the region.

Keywords: Mediterranean, Black Sea region, balance of power, geopolitics, Russia.

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1. Introduction

For the first time in the last 25 years Russia starts moves to return to the Near and Middle East and into the Mediterranean region. The atmospherics between the powers that shape the models of the stability in the region shows us at least two tendencies: 1) the world is highly transitive, and 2) the leaders of the countries, though some objective inconsistences are present, demonstrate person-to-person interaction to achieve the best possible positions for their countries within the new world order that is under formation.

From 1990s to 2000s the Black Sea region was one of the key issues both in the scientific and practical agenda of the leading American institutions: Harvard University, the Council on Foreign Relations, the National Defense University, the Brookings Institution, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, the Heritage Foundation, etc.

What about the practical policy, the period since the collapse of the Soviet Union and up to the late 1990s, was one of the uncertainty in the USA's foreign policy. However, in 1997 Washington tilted toward the model of the unipolar world challenging and turning into reality its new approach in the foreign policy to redesign Eurasia: The Grossraum concept, i.e. the theory of the large political space comprising the Greater Middle East, Great Central Asia, and the Wider Black Sea Region, emerged.

In 2004 the experts of the German Marshall Fund elaborated A New Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Black Sea Region (Asmus, etc., 2004) that became the first attempt to conceptualize those meaningful actions being taken by the US in the region since the early 1990s and that aimed to boost its position in the territory. U.S. Strategy in the Black Sea Region (Cohen, 2006) published in 2006 by the Heritage Foundation shadowed the same purpose of the US foreign policy.

Both strategies represent the concept how to squeeze Russia out of the region. The plan was to sell the idea of the Euro-Atlantic community to the East of the Black Sea region: Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Armenia also. Though the latter two have no direct entrance to the Black Sea, the leading American research institutions considered both as elements of the regional community according to the geopolitical entity with the wider Black Sea region.

The methodology of squeezing Russia out of the Black Sea region was intended for making not Russia but the Euro-Atlantic community the most influential actor in the energy and military-political processes of the region. Two steps were to be taken: 1. Substitution of the Russian peacekeeping forces by international military forces; 2. Dramatic diversification of the resource supply lines through the expulsion of some Russian energy companies.

The crucial point for the evaluation of the geopolitical interests of Russia in the Black Sea and Mediterranean region is the thorough understanding of the results of the Soviet period of the Russia's evolution. In the terms of geopolitics, the disintegration of the Soviet Union resulted into the situation when Russia lost its personality in the Mediterranean and began to look like a spent force in the Black Sea region. But the five-day Russo-Georgian War of August 2008 and Crimea's reintegration became the landmarks.

Taken Crimea back and eliminated the lease status of the Sevastopol naval base, the Russian Federation is powerful again to influence the Mediterranean region. So there emerges a necessity to give some scientific grounds to the concept of the Russian Great Mediterranean that would consider its geopolitical landscape, aims and resources of the state.

2. Methodology

Authors use the analytical-descriptive method as the basic one. The geopolitical methodology is used systematically to detach military and political leaders of the region. Besides, the review of the strategies of US thinktanks to squeeze Russia out of the Mediterranean region is given.

3. Research Structure

The research demonstrates some definite stages: firstly, the problem of the Russia's current position in the Mediterranean region is discussed; secondly, the concept of the Russian Greater Mediterranean that would consider its geopolitical landscape, aims and resources of the state is defined; thirdly, actors and objects within the region are seen from the point of view of possible balances; and finally, the focus is made upon prospects and constrains for Russia taken into consideration various types of limitations.

4. Research Findings and Analysis

4.1. The geopolitical landscape of the Great Mediterranean

The Mediterranean region is taken as one that comprises the basins of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea as well as all other water

communications of the geographical range (the Azov Sea, the Black Sea straits including the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, the Adriatic Sea, the Ionian Sea, the Strait of Gibraltar and other water communications).

The geopolitical landscape of the Great Mediterranean consists of: 1. Russia, 2. Turkey, 3. Georgia, 4. Ukraine, 5. Bulgaria, 6. Romania, 7. Moldova, 8. Greece, 9. the Republic of Cyprus, 10. the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, 11. Syria, 12. Lebanon, 13. Israel, 14. Egypt, 15. Libya, 16. Algeria, 17. Morocco, 18. Tunisia, 19. Spain, 20. Italy, 21. France, 22. Vatican City, 23. Croatia, 24. Albania, 25. Montenegro, 26. Bosnia and Herzegovina, 27. Slovenia, 28. South Ossetia, 29. Abkhazia, 30. the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. However, it is worth taking into consideration the fact, that the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is recognized only by Turkey, the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have limited international recognition, that is why the general number of states of the Mediterranean region is twenty-six. So, the region with geopolitical landscape of 30 countries includes states, which can be determined as *powers*, i.e. actors: Russia, Turkey, Israel, France and perhaps, Italy; and weaker states, which are the objects for realization of the national interests on the part of the first ones. Besides, within the region there are some unrecognized territories: South Ossetia, Trans-Dniestr, Abkhazia, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and perhaps Catalonia. In the terms of the civilizational space, the region is the settlement of a number of nations, which belong to three civilizations: Western, Islamic and Orthodox-Christian one.

In the terms of the common geography, the Mediterranean region consists of Europe, North Africa, the Near and the Middle East. In the period of the Roman Empire the region was a unity, when in the contemporary world it was Fernand Braudel, French historian, who suggested the idea of the unity of the Mediterranean world. His concept suggested that the region should include not only the littoral states but also Germany, a wider part of Russia and some territories more or less connected via water routes with the Mediterranean and the Black Sea basin (Braudel, 1996).

Theoretical grounds of the Grossraum theory (theory of large spaces) were formed by the American economist of German origin Friedrich von List in the 19th century. But it should be noted that the father of the Grossraum theory and his followers meant a homogeneous economic space that should

later acquire a political unity. Russia sees the Great Mediterranean region as a geopolitical landscape of 26 littoral states of the areas of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, four unrecognized territories (or five, if Catalonia is taken into account) that have entrance into the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean.

The operating mode of the Black Sea straits, the Suez Canal and the Gibraltar Strait are of primary importance for the development of the region. Within the scope of the 18th–20th centuries Great Britain and later the US were the powers that had the key or significant influence upon these maritime routes.

4.2. Russia's geopolitical interests in the region

After the reunion of Crimea with Russia, Moscow gets an opportunity to bring back to life the means of realization of its national interests in the Mediterranean region that were lost in the result of the USSR's dissolution. That is, there is a possibility to change the passive defensive policy for the offensive foreign policy in the Great Mediterranean. Thus, Russia's geopolitical interests in the Black Sea and Mediterranean region are formed on the basis of the following opportunities and processes:

1) at the moment the primary Russia's agenda in the Black Sea region is to prevent the expansion of the non-regional power (the USA) or expansion of the hostile military and political bloc. Up to the moment the task is realized through the division of spheres of influence with the Republic of Turkey.

2) due to the limited resource, Russia's up-to-date agenda in the Mediterranean region is much more complicated and is based upon the necessity to save the influence inherited from the USSR and to form a fair balance of power.

3) the today's Russian economic model sets a task to control Eurasian hydrocarbon production and transfer via Russian transfer systems. So, the Great Mediterranean may comprise the Caspian region as well, thus forming the arc of the Mediterranean–Black Sea–Caspian region.

4.3. The military and political leaders of the region

The military and political leaders of the region are detached on the basis of the geopolitical methodology: these are Russia, France, Italy, Turkey and, taken into consideration technological military leadership and the foreign policy support, Israel. However, for some centuries Great Britain, a non-regional power, has the key geopolitical influence in the region. Since 1945

the United States has been playing the same role. The influence of the first one is achieved due to the sovereignty over the Gibraltar peninsula and some military bases in Cyprus, that is in the central part of the region. The second power's influence is based upon the constant-operational squadron of the 6th US Navy and the counterpart military infrastructure.

The other category in the region is represented by weaker subjects: their important geographic location, not their characteristics and their imperial traditions, are those that define their geopolitical value. This category can become either the catalyst of shifts of the international situation or, on the contrary, can maintain the regional and world order: these states are Egypt, Syria, Greece, Spain, etc. Besides, the region is characterized with historically high conflict level between the opposing pairs: Arabs and Israelis, Europeans and Arabs, Europeans and Russians, Turks and Europeans, Turks and Russians, and Sunnis and Shiites.

Taken into consideration the specific character of the region as it is described above, it is worth analyzing the most influential geostrategic players in the 21st century.

4.3.1. Turkey

The Republic of Turkey is a regional actor, Russia's competitor and partner at the same time. Turkey is the Russia's key to the Mediterranean region and is able to cork Russia in the Black Sea. The Montreux Convention of 1936 that regulates the transit over the Black Sea straits remains in force up to now. In 1994 Turkey adopted some additions concerning the environmental protection in the region that complicated the Russian oil export through the Bosporus Straight and the Dardanelles, causing a long queue of Russian oil tankers. At the same time, the West and Turkey deprived Russia of monopoly of post-Soviet hydrocarbon transportation via the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. Thus, the Montreux Convention lets Turkey or any other power behind its control the transit from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and vice versa.

These days Ankara's foreign policy represents a two-level model. The upper level is a global one where Turkey is guided by the US and its allied obligations. So Ankara fully supports the Pax Americana on this level. The lower level is a regional one, where Ankara tries to put into effect its own regional interests and projects, which can contradict Washington's interests. But even on the lower level of the foreign policy there is a clash of the

regional interests of Ankara and Moscow (the Turkish leadership concept in the Sunni Islamic world may endanger Russia's integrity, Turkey's integration activity within the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking countries contradicts Russian interests in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, the Turkish policy in the Near East, especially on the Syrian issue, is unacceptable from the point of view of the Russian foreign policy). The only thing that bears no contradictions is the joint blocking against the US expansion in the Black Sea-Caspian region. Thus, the shared segment of the geopolitical space is limited enough and is connected with the Black Sea region. The limitedness of the joint interests can explain "the quick arrangements" of two top leaders on the Crimean issue in 2014. The Crimea's reintegration into Russia means Turkey less damage than possible American navy bases in Sevastopol bays. The same thing happens with Georgia's and Ukraine's integration into the NATO. If emotionally Turkey can support the Euro-Atlantic bloc's expansion over the Black Sea region, in reality the scenario comes into contradiction with Ankara's geopolitical interests and cannot be performed. So, the Turkey's foreign policy demonstrates three expansion directions: Pan-Islamic, Pan-Turkic and European. In the first two cases Ankara can play the role of the actor, in the last case in can be only the object.

When in 2000s the new geostrategic trends of the Turkish foreign policy were brought to life, moderate Islamists aimed to strengthen Turkey's regional status and the pretender to the regional leader. The line was realized within the "Strategic Depth" concept, suggested by A. Davutoğlu in the mid-2000 (Davutoğlu, 2014). Under the concept, it was presupposed to form the coalition of regional allies that would consist of the countries, which formed parts of the Ottoman Empire earlier: Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Azerbaijan, and Syria (only after the removal of Bashar al-Assad) and other countries, which can accept Turkey as a leader. Turkey assembled the alliance in order to resist the anti-Turkish coalition of the Republic of Cyprus, Greece, Serbia, Armenia, Israel and perhaps, Russia. But the political situation is highly movable and the foreign policy is fast-paced, so the Ankara's choice of allies and rivals is variable. And the main Davutoglu's principle of the 2002-2010 period–zero problems with neighbors–in 2015 has been replaced by the policy of regaining friends: crucial steps were made to normalize relations with Israel and Russia (Fuat,

2017). According to Davutoğlu, the state development centers of strategic importance should be moved deep into the Turkish territory: the concept of "zero problems" was seen not as a process imminent of the Turkish expansion, but the purpose achieved in the result of the "Strategic Depth" realization. As a matter of fact, it was a removal of political regimes and leaders in the neo-Ottoman territories that were undesirable for Turkey. So nothing strange about the fact that the policy gave the reverse effect: the phenomenon of "zero neighbors without problems" (Zero, 2013). Besides, the geopolitical component, that restricts Ankara's political-military activity in the region, is based on the idea of the Turkey's General Staff, that the Republic must avoid taking part in two and a half wars at the same time, i.e. with Greece and Syria, as well as with the Kurds inside the state.

Taken the foreign policy restrictions into account, the active Southern foreign policy for Turkey is possible only if the threats from the North of the Eurasian continent are frozen. Having chosen the Near East and the Middle East as the priority, the Republic of Turkey took the principle of the division of the influence spheres on the Northern and North-Eastern territories. In fact, under conditions of the US expansion into the Black Sea region, Moscow and Ankara agreed to oppose the expansion.

But if one generalizes some obvious and potential threats to Russia, being in the basis of the Turkish moderate Islamists' policy that will become reasons for conflicts between Russia and Turkey, it is necessary to emphasize the following faces of this bilateral conflict:

1. the Turkish policy in the Middle East within the "Strategic Depth" concept, especially on the Syrian issue, contradicts the Russian foreign policy trends; but it should be taken into account that within the "Strategic Depth" period, the Turkish foreign policy faced the US Greater Middle East project contradicting both Turkish and Russian interests that led to the improvement of Turkey-Russia relations.
2. the Turkish leadership conception of the Sunni Islamic world is a possible threat to Russia's integrity;
3. Turkey's integration activity within the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States comes in contradiction with the Russian interests in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

4.3.2. Greece

Greece has a unique geopolitical location in the Mediterranean basin,

dividing it into the Western and Eastern parts. If it is necessary Greece, due to its sovereignty over the islands of the basin can prevents Turkey from the entrance into the western part of the Mediterranean Sea. From the point of view of the civilizational approach, Greece is closer to Russia, as both have roots stretching back into the Eastern Christian civilization and demonstrate deep and complementary historical relationship. Robert Kaplan in his book The Revenge of Geography points out that Europe's future depends on three counties: Germany, Russia and Greece. The geographical determinism and civilizational closeness to both European power centers are the explanation (Kaplan, 2013).

4.3.3. Israel

Israel possesses the most developed high-technology military-industrial complex and army in the region. Israel is a regional power thanks to its first lobby in the USA, control over the financial flows and other resources.

4.3.4. Spain

Spain has a historical controversy with Great Britain about the control over Gibraltar town and military base, which in fact gives an opportunity to control the transit of vessels and war ships through the Strait of Gibraltar. Great Britain's sovereignty over the former Spanish territory dates back to 1713. The Brexit process has revived the long-standing quarrel and the new level of conflict emerged: the EU vs Great Britain. London is not going to surrender its sovereignty, in spite of the fact that the overwhelming majority (96%) of the overseas British territory population supported the idea of Gibraltar within the EU. So the explanation to the Catalan precedent as that provoked by Great Britain to balance the argument for the gates to the Atlantic may be given. Described in 1904 as "one of the five keys that lock up the world" by Sir John "Jackie" Fisher, former Admiral of the Fleet of the Royal Navy,9 the Strait of Gibraltar keeps its significance nowadays and is the world's busiest shipping lane after the English Channel. "Half of the world's trade, a third of its oil and gas, and 80 percent of the goods and gas consumed by the EU, all move through this 100-kilometer maritime corridor."10 And though the Spain–UK conflict around Gibraltar status hits the headlines, for the United States there is even more at stake. As Gibraltar plays a serious role in regional security, one of the benefits of the Anglo-American Special Relationship is the use of British military facilities around the world by the US Armed Forces (Coffey, 2014).

4.3.5. Italy

Italy is a potential Russia's ally, as it is interested in the displacement of non-regional actors from the Mediterranean region. This trend of the Italian foreign policy had been elaborated by the Italian geopolitical school before the defeat in the World War II, after which it was prohibited.

4.3.6. France

France, when the competition within the Western civilization is constant, has to win its own personality and find a counterweight to the Germany's developing expansion under the conditions of the regionalization of the world and the EU.

4.3.7. Russia

Russia's return to the region should not mean the second issue of the Paris Peace Treaty of 1856, when the West in the alliance with the Ottoman Empire deprived the Russian Empire of the Black Sea Fleet. The painful military defeat on the limited territory was accompanied by economic loses and diplomatic damage. That is to say, Russia's geopolitical activity should not result in anti-Russian coalition.

On the other hand, when elaborating the ways to realize its national interests in the region, Russia should take into account that its economic, military and technological resources are limited. So, to achieve maximum effect with the lowest expenses is possible only if traditions of the Western civilization dominating in the region for some centuries are researched and considered.

4.4. Balances to keep national interests

There are two types of approach to keep balance in the world in the methodology of the West. Both are used to support and promote national interests all over the world. These types of the approach can be summed up in two ideas: raison d'État, i.e. national interest (inspired by France's foreign policy of the Cardinal Richelieu's period) and balance of power (possible mainly due to the Britain's sea strategy) (Kissinger, 1995). Within raison d'État, a subject participates directly in one of the balances. While within the balance of power, a subject is a holder of the balance that acts remotely without any direct interference and only when the situation becomes critical it demonstrates its full support to the part which would help it to get the national interest. Being independent sea policymaker and geographically distant from the field of rivalry is an obvious condition for the latter type of the balance of power (Kissinger, 1995).

5. Conclusion

Thus Russia, taking into account its sea potential and the concept that its foreign policy is realized on land principally, can benefit from both types of balancing to elaborate its own "Russian balance" in the Mediterranean region – just a kind of rearrangement of various resources and asymmetrical effects of actions. In addition, soft power concept should keep pace with the launched military and political mechanisms.

But it should be mentioned that the amount of maneuvering for Russia is limited to a certain extent due to its contemporary economic model that is dependent on the Western economies: no state can afford geopolitical opposition if it is on the economic periphery of the rival. Another constraint for the Moscow's foreign policy is the possibility that the West would get its act together and pool its resources with Turkey out of Ant-Russian policy. In other words, the Russia's foreign policy in the region should be flexible enough to avoid the scenario of the Treaty of Paris of 1856 when Russia was deprived any military or political influence in the region by the Western alliance and Turkey.

The very hallmark of the region where actors and objects closely interact make Russia develop and implement its special geostrategic line to build a balance in the region on favorable terms. So the system of alliances is meant that would accelerate the creation of the multipolar system of foreign relations where Russia and other regional powers will have a higher level of military, political and economic freedom.

The Russia's foreign policy strategy in the Great Mediterranean will be successful if some conditions are met: the country's foreign policy is provided with resources, the modernization is real but not simulated, the economy is fully independent, and a competent future-oriented state ideology is present.

6. Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Sevastopol State University for support of this research, and also editors and peer reviewers for their helpful comments in the way of improvement of the paper.

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