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# THE MARINE STRATEGY OF RUSSIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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<p><b>Article history:</b> <i>Received:</i> 04.06.2020 <i>Accepted:</i> 03.09.2020</p>	<p><b>Abstract:</b> The world media and international discussions at the highest level again are focusing on the Russian’s policy in the Middle East. This is to a large extent the result of the successful operations of the Russian Aerospace Forces and the Navy in Syria. The article defines the conceptual fundamentals of the modern maritime policy of Russia in the Middle East. The authors analyze the main points of the new directions of Russian maritime strategy in the Mediterranean, which were formulated in the following documents: “Fundamentals of the State policy of the Russian Federation in the field of naval activities for the period until 2030”, “Marine Doctrine of the Russian Federation” and “Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on the expansion of the territory of the logistics point of the Navy of the Russian Federation in the vicinity of the port of Tartus”. The participation of the Russian fleets in the military operations in Syria showed that the Russian Navy successfully overcame the systemic crisis and took up positions corresponding to the status of a great power.</p>
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<p><b>Key words:</b> Middle East; Mediterranean Sea; Persian Gulf; Syria; Marine Strategy; Russia; Russian fleet; Russian marine doctrine</p>	

## Historical background

Two decades ago, Russia had no naval strategy. Western naval experts noted that the Russian Navy was a “fleet, doomed to death” and for a long time had been in state of coma.<sup>1</sup> That was a fair conclusion. During the era of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, the potential of only a submarine fleet, which at one time was the most

expensive and reliable component of Moscow as part of the USSR Armed Forces, decreased from 400 submarines in 1985 to 65 in 2007. The number of sailors in active military service fell from almost half a million in 1985 to 146 thousand, many of whom were conscripts.

However, the situation began to change since 2008, when V. Putin was the Prime Minister of Russia. Since that time, a quarter of all defense funds have gone to the restoration of the Navy. Russia’s shipbuilding capacity system has started to show progressive trends

<sup>1</sup> O’Keefe, A. Dr. Tom Fedyszyn on the State of the Russian Navy // The Maritime Executive, January 2, 2017. Mode of access: <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/dr-tom-fedyszyn-on-the-state-of-the-russian-navy>

in the production of several types of warships equipped with the most advanced equipment, including “Yasen” ballistic missiles. Nuclear submarines of a new class that are well known among specialists in naval engineering appeared – “Borey”, “Akula”, “Severodvinsk”, “Kazan”; surface ships “Steregushchiy”, “Boykiy”, “Stoykiy”, “Admiral Gorshkov”; aircraft carrier “Kuznetsov”. Already in 2009, the military-political leadership of Russia made an official announcement according to which the Russian fleet overcame the crisis period, fully recovered and is now able to carry out tasks that correspond to the fleet of the great power.<sup>2</sup> Two years later the head of naval operations of the US Navy, Admiral Garry Roughhead, speaking to the members of the military subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said that “the Russian Navy is on the rise again”.<sup>3</sup>

On September 1, 2013, in order to carry out tasks in the Mediterranean region and taking into account the evolving military-political situation, a Permanent Operational Connection of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean Sea was created. With the start of the military operation of the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria on September 30, 2015 the compound takes part in this operation, providing the cover for the Russian aerospace forces in Syria and the Khmeimim air base. At different times on the basis of rotation the compound included the flagships of all Russian fleets: the heavy aircraft-carrying cruiser “Admiral Kuznetsov”, the heavy nuclear missile cruiser “Peter the Great”, the guards missile cruisers “Moscow” and “Varyag”, the frigates “Admiral Grigorovich”, “Admiral Essen” and “Admiral Makarov”. At present, the Russian fleet has 217 warships of various types and 69 submarines, of which 45 operate on nuclear fuel (See *Tables*).

<sup>2</sup> The Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2018/19. Haifa Research Center for Maritime Policy & Strategy, 2019. P. 44. (in Hebrew)

<sup>3</sup> Cavas, C.P. Roughhead Says Russian, Chinese Navies Growing // *Navy Times*, March 16, 2011. Mode of access: [www.navytimes.com/news/Varch2011/03/defense-navy--cno-assesses-russian-chines-navies-031611](http://www.navytimes.com/news/Varch2011/03/defense-navy--cno-assesses-russian-chines-navies-031611)

Table 1.

**Submarines in the Russian Fleet (as of 2020)<sup>4</sup>**

Class	BF	BSF	NF	PF	CF	Total:
Nuclear-powered Ballistic Missile Submarines (SSBN)	-	-	8	3	-	11
Nuclear-powered Guided Missile Submarines (SSGN)	-	-	4	5	-	9
Nuclear-powered Attack Submarines (SSN)	-	-	13	4	-	17
Nuclear-powered Special Mission Submarines (SSAN)	-	-	8	-	-	8
Special Purpose Submarines (SSA)	-	-	1	-	-	1
Attack Submarines (SS)	1	7	6	9	-	23
<b>Total:</b>						<b>69</b>

BF – Baltic Fleet, BSF – Black Sea Fleet, NF – Northern Fleet, PF – Pacific Fleet, CF – Caspian Flotilla

Table 2.

**Warships in the Russian Fleet (as of 2020)**

Class	BF	BSF	NF	PF	CF	Total:
Aircraft Carriers (CV)	-	-	1	-	-	1
Heavy Nuclear-powered Guided Missile Cruisers (CGN)	-	-	2	1	-	3
Guided Missile Cruisers (CG)	-	1	1	1	-	3
Large ASW Ships (DDGS)	-	1	5	4	-	10
Guided Missile Destroyers (DDG)	1	-	1	2	-	4
Guided Missile Corvettes (FFC)	4	-	-	2	-	6
Guided Missile Frigates (FFG)	2	6	1	-	2	11
Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV)	-	2	-	-	-	2
Small ASW Ships (FSS)	6	6	6	8	-	26
Guided Missile Corvettes (FC)	8	7	2	4	3	24
Guided Missile Boats (PGM)	6	5	-	11	1	23
Small Gun Ships (FS)	-	-	-	-	3	3
Gunboats (PG)	-	-	1	-	5	6
Seagoing Minesweepers (MSO)	1	8	3	2	-	14

<sup>4</sup> Russian Navy 2020: List of Active Russian Navy Ships and Submarines // RussianShips.info, January 17, 2020. Mode of access: <http://russianships.info/eng/today/vb>

Class	BF	BSF	NF	PF	CF	Total:
Base Minesweepers (MSC)	4	-	6	7	2	19
Inshore Minesweepers (MSI)	5	1	1	1	5	13
Landing Ships (LST)	4	7	5	4	-	20
Landing Crafts Air Cushion (LCAC)	2	-	-	-	-	2
Landing Crafts (LCM)	9	5	4	4	6	29
<b>Total:</b>						<b>219</b>

For comparison, at the beginning of 2020 the US Navy was armed with 290 units of military naval equipment, including 68 submarines, of which only 12 were equipped with ballistic missiles.<sup>5</sup>

At the international conference “Geopolitics: Maritime Aspect”, which was held on February 3, 2020 at Haifa University, the participating experts on maritime policy and the law of the sea unanimously noted that Russia had again become a global power and took a strong position in the strategically important region of the Eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf.<sup>6</sup>

### The contemporary geopolitical position of Russia in the Middle East

Immediately after the crushing defeat of the terrorist international in Syria, in August 2017 President Vladimir Putin signed a document called “Fundamentals of the State policy of the Russian Federation in the field of naval activities until 2030”.<sup>7</sup> According to the eighth paragraph of this document the Russian Federation continues to maintain the status of a great maritime power, the maritime potential of which ensures the realization and protection of its national interests in any region of the World Ocean, is an important factor of international

<sup>5</sup> *Naval Vessel Register. Fleet Size. Classification of Naval Vessels are in Accordance with SECNAV Instruction 5030. 8 p.* Mode of access: <http://www.nvr.navy.mil/NVRSIPS/FLEETSIZE.HTML>

<sup>6</sup> *Chorev, Shaul; Gonen, Ehud* (Project heads). *The Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2019/20*. Haifa Research Center for Maritime Policy & Strategy, 2020. P. 20. (in Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup> *Fundamentals of the State policy of the Russian Federation in the field of naval activities for the period until 2030*. Newport, Rhode Island, USA. The Russia Maritime Studies Institute at the U.S. Naval War College, 2017. P. 3. (Translation of the official document in English).

stability and strategic containment and makes it possible to implement independent national maritime policy as an equal participant in international maritime activities.

The logic of the formation of the current naval policy of the Russian Federation shows that the implementation of the government’s naval policy in the future is ineffective without:

- understanding in the higher echelons of power the value of the Russian Navy;
- the creation in the state of the relevant management body for the implementation of naval policies on the sound legal doctrinal basis in the form of the “Naval Doctrine of Russia”;
- a long-term construction program of the Navy, approved at the level of law and binding for the domestic industry;
- the support of the country’s population authority service in the Navy.<sup>8</sup>

The twenty-seventh paragraph of this document explains the need for the naval presence of the Russian Federation in strategically important and other areas of the oceans, including the Middle East:

- a) the increased aspirations of a range of states to possess the sources of hydrocarbon energy resources in the Near East, the Arctic and the Caspian Sea basin;
- b) the negative impact on international security of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, the Republic of Iraq, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, conflicts in the Near and Middle East, and in several countries in South Asia and Africa;
- c) the possibility of escalation of existing and the emergence of new interstate conflicts in any area of the World Ocean;
- d) the spread of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, as well as in the waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans;
- e) the ability of foreign states to hinder the Russian Federation’s economic activities and scientific research on the World Ocean.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Moskovenko, M. *Naval doctrine of Russia as the basis of the naval policy of the country // The Centre of Strategic Estimations and Forecasts, the Russian Federation, September 28, 2017*. Mode of access: <http://csef.ru/en/politica-i-geopolitica/510/voenno-morskaya-doktrina-rossii-kak-osnova-morskoj-politiki-strany-7983>

<sup>9</sup> *Fundamentals of the State policy of the Russian Federation in the field of naval activities for the period until 2030*. Newport, Rhode Island, USA.

In the document “The Marine Doctrine of the Russian Federation”, previously signed by the Russian president on July 26, 2015 Russia's main priorities in the Mediterranean were reduced to the following provisions:

a) pursuing a focused course on turning the region into a zone of military-political stability and good neighborliness;

b) ensuring a sufficient naval presence of the Russian Federation in the region on an ongoing basis;

c) the development of cruise shipping from the ports of Crimea and the Krasnodar territory to the countries of the Mediterranean basin.

It was emphasized, however, that Naval activities are among the highest Russian State priorities.<sup>10</sup>

### Criticism of the new Russian Naval policy

It is noteworthy that in Russia as well as elsewhere the adoption of a new Doctrine and new Fundamentals of Russia's policy in the World Ocean caused a wave of criticism. Some authoritative experts questioned the realism of several rather ambitious provisions of the abovementioned documents. One of the well-known specialists in Russian maritime policy Mikhail Barabanov from the Moscow-based Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST) is convinced that “the Fundamentals probably reflect the ongoing struggle for priorities in the procurement policy in accordance with the State New Armament Program 2025. In his opinion, the document was permeated with nostalgia for the late-Soviet naval construction times (even ekranoplans got into the text), and in this sense is largely unrealistic. The entire historical experience of Russia shows that the fascination with the fleet on the part of the country's leadership led either to catastrophic defeats (in the Crimean and Russian-Japanese wars), or took much-needed

funds from the Ground Forces before both world wars, and the fleet played an insignificant role in them. The Soviet Ocean Fleet in the 1970-1980s demanded huge funds, but contributed to the foreign policy of the USSR very little and in the 1990s degraded faster than all other types of armed forces”,<sup>11</sup> the expert is convinced.

Alexei Nikolskiy is another respected military observer who is of the same opinion. He argued that the policy was “permeated with nostalgia”, set “excessively ambitious goals”, and was “largely unrealistic”.<sup>12</sup>

Russia's modern maritime strategy has been met in the West critically. The article recently published in the “Jerusalem Post” and written by a retired admiral, Prof. Shaul Chorev and the former US Deputy Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith is devoted to the analysis of marine geopolitics of Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean. It argues, in particular, that “Russia enjoys anarchy associated with America's desire to withdraw troops from the Middle East. While both last US presidents were interested in leaving the Middle East, Russia actively and even aggressively filled the vacuum. The article concludes: “Russia shares the interest of the United States in the stability of the Middle East, but in fact, Russia often and actively contributes to the destabilization in the region”.<sup>13</sup> We cannot agree with this statement. Our view is closer to the position of the captain of the first rank of the US Navy Thomas Fedyszyn, who believes that the geopolitical strategies of Russia and the United States, despite the complicated relations

The Russia Maritime Studies Institute at the U.S. Naval War College, 2017. P. 5-6. (Translation of the official document in English).

<sup>10</sup> Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 2015. Newport, Rhode Island, USA: The Russia Maritime Studies Institute at the U.S. Naval War College, 2017. P. 22. (Translation of the official document in English).

<sup>11</sup> Novaya voyenno-morskaya doktrina Rossii stavit chrezmernyye tseli // *Vedomosti*, July 23 (Russia's New Naval Doctrine Sets Unrealistic Targets) // *Vedomosti*, July 23, 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2017/07/24/725414-voenno-morskaya-doktrina>

<sup>12</sup> Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Activities for the Period until 2030. Rome, Italy: NATO Defense College, January 22, 2019. Mode of access: <http://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=574>

<sup>13</sup> Feith, D.J.; Chorev S. Russia's Eastern Mediterranean strategy // *The Jerusalem Post*, September 28, 2019. Mode of access: <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Russias-Eastern-Mediterranean-strategy-603211>

between the two states, actually coincide and pursue one goal – “to prevent conflicts and the main challenges for the fleets of each country are terrorism, criminal elements and natural disasters”.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the main goal of Russian strategy in the Middle East is to increase the status of Russia and secure for it the role of a significant external force in one of the most unstable regions of the world. There are other important tasks in this region:

- Deterrence and weakening of Islamic extremism and radicalism, the influence of which can spread to the territory of Russia and its closest neighbors from among the republics of the former USSR.

- Ensuring a limited military presence of Russia in the region and on its borders.

- Expansion of the Russian presence in the regional markets of weapons, oil and gas, food, etc.

- Attraction of investments to Russia, including those from the rich countries of the Persian Gulf.

- Maintaining energy prices through the coordination of action with key oil and gas suppliers in the Gulf countries.

### **Russian participation in the Syrian conflict. The geopolitical aspect**

After the defeat of Daesh<sup>15</sup> in Syria, Russia is again an important military-political force in the Middle East. Even Western experts admit that “Through maritime operations, Russia has extended the range of its military influence. The Russian presence creates new “rules of the game” throughout the Middle East, affecting the US and Israel’s ability to operate freely”.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> On December 29, 2014, on the basis of the Prosecutor-General’s Office decision, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation recognized the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and affiliated with Daesh «Jabhat al-Nusra» («Support Front») as terrorist international organizations and banned their activities in Russia.

<sup>16</sup> Feith, D.J.; Chorev S. Russia’s Eastern Mediterranean strategy // *The Jerusalem Post*, September 28, 2019. Mode of access: <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Russias-Eastern-Mediterranean-strategy-603211>

Russia has two bases that allow controlling the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf. Thanks to the naval base in Tartus – the main Material-Technical Support Point of the Russian Navy in Syria, Russia, if necessary, can also control submarine communication cables that connect the Middle East with Europe. “The current agreement will stay effective for 49 years and be automatically prolonged for 25-year periods, if neither party makes a twelve months’ notice in writing through diplomatic channels of its intention to terminate the agreement’s operation”<sup>17</sup>, a bilateral agreement signed on January 18, 2017 by the governments of Russia and Syria states. “The maximum number of Russian warships allowed to stay simultaneously at the maintenance base is 11, including nuclear-powered combat ships, provided that nuclear and environmental safety is complied with,”<sup>18</sup> says the agreement. Russia had also deployed in Eastern Mediterranean its oceanographic research vessel “Yantar”, which is equipped for deep sea surveillance and connected to top-secret communication cables. Western experts believe that “Yantar” can connect undersea cables and also “cut and jam underwater sensors.”<sup>19</sup>

Participation in hostilities in Syria allowed gaining practical experience in conducting military operations involving all military branches and using the most modern weapons. It has been proven that it’s not even necessary to send ships to the Mediterranean Sea – there is a weapon that can hit targets at a distance of a thousand or more kilometers.

<sup>17</sup> Russian-Syrian Naval and Air Basing Agreements, 2015-2017. Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on the stationing of an Aviation Group of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic (as amended on January 18, 2017). Newport, Rhode Island, USA: The Russia Maritime Studies Institute at the U.S. Naval War College, 2017. P. 23. (Translation of the official document in English).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Feith, D.J. Russia’s Eastern Mediterranean Strategy – Implications for the United States and Israel. Washington: Hudson Institute. December 19, 2019. Mode of access: <https://www.hudson.org/research/15577-russia-s-eastern-mediterranean-strategy-implications-for-the-united-states-and-israel#fn7787666725e4141a3a6be8>

With minimal losses and costs,<sup>20</sup> a crushing blow was inflicted on the so-called “Islamic state”. The defeat of the terrorist international in Syria is an extremely important event for Russia. Recall that now about 20% of the population of Russia is Muslims. Russia is rapidly “turning green”. There is not only a natural increase in the Muslim population in the Russian regions, where Islamic positions have always been strong. Millions of Muslims come to work in Russia from Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics. In Moscow alone, according to official figures, more than 3 million visitors are citizens of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. If “the caliphate” was victorious in Syria and Iraq, then thousands of Islamic terrorists would rush to Central Asia and from there to Russia which has enough problems with fighters returning from Syria and Iraq to places of their exodus.

## Conclusion

Moscow’s geopolitical priorities in The Middle East today include the search for a peaceful settlement in Syria. At the same time, Moscow is ready to cooperate in this matter with all interested states, including the United States; expanding and strengthening ties with Turkey and Iran; maintaining close relations with Egypt, Iraq and the Kurds – both Syrian and Iraqi; to the extent possible, establishing pragmatic relations with Saudi Arabia and other Arab States of the Persian Gulf; coordinating absolutely all actions with Israel.

Thus, Russia has returned to the Middle East. And, despite the fact that there are complicated

relations between the countries of this region, it maintains normal relations with the main states – Ankara, Cairo, Tehran, Riyadh, Amman and, of course, Jerusalem. The Kremlin’s policy in the Middle East is built primarily on geopolitical incentives. Not least, important for Moscow, is the factor of internal stability of the Russian Federation itself.

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<sup>20</sup> According to official sources, a military operation in Syria was allocated 33 billion rubles, which were first budgeted by the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation for conducting military training in 2015. Russian and foreign experts point to the impossibility of reliably determining the cost of the operation, but agree with a small share of the expenditures in the military budget. According to experts of the Jane’s Information Group, the relatively low level of Russian expenditure on a military operation is explained by the participation of the Navy and the establishment of marine supplies (Hille K. Russia Defies Recession to Fund Syria Conflict // *Financial Times*, October 25, 2015. Mode of access: <https://www.ft.com/content/8f9c21fa-7957-11e5-933d-efcdc3c11c89>

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## МОРСКАЯ СТРАТЕГИЯ РОССИИ НА БЛИЖНЕМ ВОСТОКЕ

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<p><b>Информация о статье:</b>  <i>Поступила в редакцию:</i> 4 июня 2020  <i>Принята к печати:</i> 3 сентября 2020</p>	<p><b>Аннотация:</b> Российская политика на Ближнем Востоке вновь находится в центре внимания мировых СМИ и международных дискуссий на самом высоком уровне. Во многом это связано с удачными действиями российских Военно-Космических Сил и Военно-Морского Флота в Сирии. В статье раскрываются концептуальные основы современной морской политики России на Ближнем Востоке. Авторы анализируют основные положения новых направлений морской политики России в Средиземноморье, которые были сформулированы в следующих документах: «Государственная политика Российской Федерации в области военно-морской деятельности на период до 2030 года», «Морская доктрина российской Федерации» и «Соглашение между Российской Федерацией и Сирийской Арабской Республикой о расширении территории пункта материально-технического обеспечения Военно-Морского Флота Российской Федерации в районе порта Тартус». Участие российских флотов в военной операции в Сирии показало, что ВМФ России успешно преодолел системный кризис и занял позиции, соответствующие статусу великой державы.</p>
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<p><b>Ключевые слова:</b>  Ближний Восток; Средиземное море; Персидский залив; Сирия; морская стратегия; Россия; российский флот; российская морская доктрина</p>	

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