

How annexing Crimea has affected the Russian Navy and overall power projection in the Black Sea region?

Richard Koyumdjian
Vicepresident of AthenaLab

The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 by the Russian Federation (RF) affected positively the Russian Federation Navy (RFN) and its overall power projection capabilities in the Black Sea Region (BSR), but also had costs that came with it.

This essay will show that considering all positive and negative impacts, the overall result of the annexation of Crimea by the RF

for the RFN and its power projection capacity in the BSR is definitely in the positive side.

The following map shows clearly the geographical location of Crimea in relation to the Black Sea (BS) and the power projection capacity it generates to whom controls that territory. Crimea also has an influence on the Kerch Strait and the access to the Sea of Azov. Alfred Thayer Mahan indicated that the



Source: Encyclopedia Britannica Black Sea Map 2014

strategic value of a given location is primarily given by its situation and in this case it is evident that from a naval perspective, Crimea fits the definition of a good position.¹

Given that definition, it should be obvious for the Russian Government and its defence establishment the need to control Crimea or negate its use by other countries that could eventually have interests that are contrary to Russian objectives. The BSR already includes three North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member countries (Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania), and two countries that have shown back in the past an affinity or intentions to establish relations with NATO (Ukraine and Georgia), and that had it not been for the Russian efforts to discourage their association with NATO, they could well be by now members of that organization.² Having Ukraine controlling Crimea should not be in the best interests of the RF. One thing is to be a bordering country, and another one is to allow them a position that gives them advantages when it comes to projecting power on the BSR with the impact that does have on the security of the southern border of the RF. Of the three possible reasons that Russian President Vladimir Putin may have had to seize Crimea, one that comes in first is that the move would have been driven with the purpose of avoiding the new Ukraine government of joining NATO together with getting the RFN out of Sevastopol.³

From a naval perspective, the main Crimean asset is the port of Sevastopol. Sevastopol has been the principal naval base for the RFN Black Sea Fleet (BSF) and its predecessors since 1783 when Catherine the Great annexed Crimea.

With the break-up of the former Soviet Union, the naval installations of Sevastopol and Odessa, and the shipyards at Nikolayev passed to be part of Ukraine.⁴ Crimea had been transferred in 1954 from the Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics (RSFSR) to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UkrSSR). From 1997 and until the March 2014 annexation of Crimea by the RF, the naval base of Sevastopol was leased by the RFN. This lease was obtained as part of what is known as the 'Black Sea Fleet Accords' signed in May 1997 after a five year complicated negotiation process. In these accords basically it was agreed to (i) split the BSF on a 50-50 basis, (ii) lease the Sevastopol port and installations for 20 years, and (iii) more important yet, Crimea and Sevastopol were ratified as part of Ukraine.⁵

The Sevastopol lease included cohabiting with the Ukrainian Navy and had a series of restrictions that limited what the RFN could do when it came to its naval forces located in Sevastopol. Its size was limited to a maximum of 100 combat and support vessels and 25,000 personnel.⁶ This implied that it could only swap old ships for new similar ones, but by no chance increase the size of its fleet, therefore

¹ Mahan (1941) p.68

² Treisman 'Why Putin Took Crimea, The Gambler in the Kremlin' Foreign Affairs May/June 2016 p.48

³ Ibid p.47

⁴ Global Security 'Black Sea Fleet (BSF)'

⁵ Felgenhauer (1999) p.1

⁶ Global Security 'Black Sea Fleet (BSF)'

limiting the potential power projection that could be achieved in the BSR. The accords also included other administrative restrictions that came with the fact that Sevastopol was located in a foreign sovereign country.⁷ In practice the above restrictions together with the financial limitations of the 90s and early years of this millennium left the BSF with a fleet fixed numbers, but also getting old and rusting away.⁸

In 2010 the Sevastopol lease was renewed for another 25 years after the expiration of the original lease in 2017 taking the agreement all the way up to 2042. This renewal was done under the government of the Pro-Russian of Viktor Yanukovich and also under the pressure of an increase in gas prices paid by Ukraine to Russia. This renewal was contested internally in Ukraine by opposition forces.⁹ The extension of the lease did not change the restrictions that came with the 1997 original accords.¹⁰

As mentioned previously, prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Navy enjoyed the use of the facilities located in Odessa and Sevastopol in the BS, but with both of them located in Ukraine and the limitations and problems that came with the use of Sevastopol, the RFN started to consider alternatives and went ahead with the development of the Novorossiysk port as a

naval base. The big advantage of Novorossiysk is being located on Russian territory, but it does not have the natural conditions that Sevastopol enjoys and needs to be protected from the storms and 'bora'winds that hit the port when in poor weather conditions.¹¹ The mitigating actions include building a tunnel in the Caucasus Mountains so as to diminish the destructive effects of the winds.¹² On the other hand, and from a purely strategic perspective, having a second naval base in the BSR can be a good decision. This decision to go forward with the development of Novorossiysk was not stopped in spite of the further developments that affected Crimea in 2014. This naval facility is currently used by three Varshavyanka class project 636.6 submarines and is expected to get another three more in the future.¹³

For the RFN all of this changed when Crimea was annexed by the RF in March of 2014. One of the first actions of the Russian government was to do away with the Black Sea Accords and the restrictions that came with it, therefore giving a free hand to the use of all the facilities by the RFN.¹⁴ This included closing down the Ukrainian Navy operations in Sevastopol and access and use of the Ukrainian naval bases of Novoozerne, Myrnyi, Saky, Balaklava and a Marine infantry base located at Feodosiia.¹⁵ Additionally, the RFN took control of all 79 Ukrainian Navy vessels that were at the time

⁷ Posner 'The 1997 Black Sea Fleet Agreement between Russia and Ukraine' International Law 2014

⁸ Chapter 21 by Klaus A.R. Mommsen in Krause and Bruns (2016) loc.10809 kindle edition

⁹ Yuhas and Jalabi 'Ukraine crisis: why Russia sees Crimea as its naval stronghold' The Guardian 2014

¹⁰ Daly 'Hot Issue: After Crimea: The Future of the Black Sea Fleet' Jamestown 2014

¹¹ Bugriy 'The Future of the Russian Black Sea Fleet's Bases: Novorossiysk Versus Sevastopol' Jamestown 2013

¹² Litovkin 'Russia to open new naval base in Black Sea to counter NATO' RBTH 2016

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Global Security 'Black Sea Fleet (BSF)'

¹⁵ Daly 'Hot Issue: After Crimea: The Future of the Black Sea Fleet' Jamestown 2014

in Sevastopol and other facilities located in Crimea. With time, a good part of those assets have been handed back to the Ukrainian authorities, the main reason being the operational condition of the material that was seized. The idea at the time was to keep 31 vessels out of the 79 subject to their operational conditions and investments needed to incorporate them to the BSF.¹⁶

Additional benefits for the BSF came with the fact that Crimea has seven shipyards and the capabilities that come with that, but more important yet is the fact that together with all the above, the RF government committed at the time of the annexation US\$2.3 billion in investments and assets for the BSF, of which part of it should be in the way of 30 new warships. Other commitments included placing in Crimea aviation assets in the form of fighters/interceptors, long-range bombers and helicopters.¹⁷ By mid-2016 the building-up program was underway and the BSF was getting its share of the Admiral Grigorovich-class frigates, missile corvettes, diesel-powered submarines, interceptors, tactical bombers and long-range bombers.¹⁸ This is not what was initially expected, but definitely better than the starting point in which the BSF was by February 2014.

From the perspective of the RFN and of the BSF in particular the annexation of Crimea not only freed them of the restrictions that the Black Sea Accords imposed on them when it comes to the use of the Sevastopol naval

facilities, but also brought them very much needed renewal of warships and auxiliary vessels, the end of the limitations on the size of the fleet and the personnel stationed in the base. Shipyards and additional naval facilities were acquired with the seizure, increasing the support and logistics that the fleet could require, and because of the risk of losing the lease over Sevastopol in the years before 2014, the RFN got an additional naval base in Novorossiysk that increases its coverage and reduces its risk of concentration in Crimea. Aviation assets were also allocated to Crimea with the purpose of protection and power projection in the form of long-range bombers.

The negative side for the RFN came in the form of the European Union (EU) sanctions that came with the Ukrainian conflict and that manifested itself in the non-delivery of the two Mistral-class helicopter carriers ordered from the French DCNS and of the option of building an additional two in Russian shipyards after delivery of the first two. This would not be a problem if the Russian naval industry were capable of coming-up with something of a similar fashion.

For now, they will have to keep their legacy Ropucha and Alligator-class ships operating until they are in conditions of producing some type of modern LPD's.¹⁹ The EU sanctions also impacted the importation of MTU diesel engines and spare parts for Corvettes and forcing to use less reliable local sourcing. Other negative impacts from the annexation

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Gorenburg 'Black Sea Fleet projects power westwards' Russiamil 2016

¹⁹ Chapter 21 by Klaus A.R. Mommsen in Krause and Bruns (2016) loc.10878 kindle edition

of Crimea came in the form of non-access to the gas turbines produced in Ukraine and used by RFN and fitted-in frigates type of ships. This capacity has not been well developed yet by Russian manufacturers.²⁰ The problems with Ukraine also meant that access to the Nikolayev shipyard was not any longer an option. Nikolayev is the shipyard that built more sophisticated type ships such as the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft cruiser and the four Kiev-class carriers.²¹

Indirectly the RFN as any other Russian state financed organization is suffering the impact of the United States (US) and EU sanctions imposed in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea. The combined sanctions have an impact of 1.5% of the GDP²². It accompanied with a decline in the oil prices that produced a contraction of the GDP calculated in 3.7%.²³ Rebuilding the navy's position in the BSR not only requires redeploying assets, but also procurement efforts that need to be funded.

Considering all positives and negatives, the RFN and its BSF come out of the Crimean annexation in better shape. The negative aspects did have a cost, but it is a cost that delays the investment in naval resources needed to make a more effective use of naval facilities the annexation provided. A naval force bases its power structure on its assets, on the political will to make use of it, and on the logistical facilities that it has available to support them. Assuming that the political is

available, the Crimea annexation by the RF positively impacted the availability and quantity of naval assets, and definitely left the BSF in a much better position when it comes to naval logistic facilities (naval bases, ports and shipyards). This should mean an increased capacity to exercise sea control and access denial, and project power on the BSR; but a completely different matter is to consider that the RFN is in conditions to project power in a significant way beyond it. The acquired capabilities are limited to the BS and are not exportable to other sea regions. Providing logistics support from Sevastopol and Novorossiysk to the operation they are running in Syria and firing Kalibr missiles from the Caspian Sea does not mean that Russia is a global seapower. Yes it does help to the purposes of projecting the image of a global power, but one thing is perception, and another is reality, and for that to happen, the force structure would need to be very different and so would the global availability of naval facilities.²⁴

Power projection is a relative concept. It not only depends on the power structure that a specific organization may have, but also depends on the capacity that the receiving end has to deal with the power being projected against it. The Black Sea Region includes three NATO countries (Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania) and another two that as mentioned before, have an affinity or are close partners to NATO (Ukraine and Georgia). In the NATO

²⁰ Polmar and Koman "New" Russian Navy: Part 2 One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Proceedings January 2017

²¹ Global Security 'Black Sea Fleet (BSF)'

²² Interfax 'Western sanctions cost Russia 1.5% of GDP – Alexei Kudrin' RBTH 2015

²³ The World Bank Group 'Russia Economic Report N°35' 2016 p.ii

²⁴ Chapter 21 by Klaus A.R. Mommsen in Krause and Bruns (2016) loc.10899 kindle edition

July 2016 Warsaw Summit the situation in the Black Sea was recognized as one of preoccupation because of deterioration of the security environment, but apart from the promise to support the efforts of the littoral countries in terms of security and stability, there was not much more said when it comes to ways with handling Russia and the power projection its performing in this sea region.²⁵ Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently stressed before attending the Warsaw Summit that NATO inactivity in the BS will transform it into a Russian Lake.²⁶ In summary, and in spite of the membership that NATO has in the BSR, NATO member countries and partners actions so far have not discouraged Russian behaviour, and unless more strong actions are taken to increase the spending in defence matters, the modernization of their military and naval services, and a more integrated and common approach towards the Russian actions, no changes should be expected to happen.²⁷ Regular visits of US Navy ships are not enough when it comes to sending messages to Russia on the US commitment to the BS. There is a need for more strong and coordinate actions.

Why is it important to get the NATO BS countries organized when it comes to Russian power projection in the BS? It is important because of the restrictions that the Montreux Treaty of 1936 imposes on the navigation of the Turkish straits (Straits of the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmora and the Bosphorus). The Montreux Treaty was set-up with the purpose

of providing security to Turkey and the littoral states of the BS, but limits severely the assistance of naval vessels belonging to outside countries. That means that in case of conflict between NATO BS members and Russia, outside NATO Navy ships could be not allowed through the straits. The treaty also includes provisions and limitations for non-BS powers in respect to tonnage (under 15,000 tons), aggregate tonnage of no more than 45,000 tons, type of vessels, and maximum stay of 21 days in the BSR. Current limitations would not allow for US Navy aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines to show-up in the BS.²⁸ Any practical solution to the situation created by the Montreux Treaty would require leveraging on the current BS NATO members and / or a NATO multinational naval force that could keep rotating its components so as to circumvent the restrictions that the treaty imposes on non-BS navies.²⁹ Both solutions are not easy to implement and require political commitments from participating countries. Currently as it stands, the Montreux treaty is an asset for the purposes of the RFN power projection in the BS and a severe limitation both for other BS countries (except Turkey) and outside naval powers that would eventually come to the assistance of BS countries in conflict with Russia. It could be said that it is functional to the needs of Russian power projection in the BSR.³⁰

²⁵ NATO 'Warsaw Summit Communiqué' July 2016

²⁶ Orient News 'Erdogan will go to NATO Warsaw Summit with critical messages on Black Sea, Syria' 2016

²⁷ Bugajski and Doran 'Black Sea Defended: NATO Responses to Russia's Black Sea Offensive' CEPA 2016

²⁸ Global Security 'Montreux Convention 1936'

²⁹ Lamrani 'More Boats on the Black Sea' Stratfor 2016

³⁰ Starr 'How the Montreux Convention Would Help Russia in an Ukraine War' ibtimes 2014

CONCLUSION

The Crimea annexation impacted positively the Russian Federation Navy and its power projection capabilities in the Black Sea Region. It brought facilities that were not available under the lease of Sevastopol and freed them of the restrictions that the Black Sea accords imposed on them. Free of limitations, the Russian Federation Navy went ahead with investments that together with the availability of logistical support, allow them now to project power in a more effective way in the Black Sea Region. The economic sanctions have delayed the Black Sea Fleet growth, but independent of that fact, the situation is far better than before the annexation. Power projection so far has not been challenged by NATO and the Montreux Convention severely limits the capacity of outside naval powers and NATO members to support Black Sea littoral countries under stress from Russia.