

The Bear Learns to Swim: Russia's Re-emergence in the Mediterranean

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The article explores the recent surge of Russian military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and evaluates the implications of Moscow's decision to challenge the regional status quo. In November 2015, the downing of a Russian fighter jet over Syrian airspace turned analysts' attention to the increasing involvement of Russia in the Syrian battlefield. Moscow's entanglement in the Syrian civil war was only the latest episode in its historically persistent effort to establish a permanent presence in Mediterranean waters. Developments in recent years, however, point to a more ambitious approach. This article argues that Moscow's unfolding strategy entails the gradual assertion of Russian air superiority over critical parts of the Eastern Mediterranean, a Russian aspiration that has been elusive even during the peak of the Cold War rivalry. Moscow's grand strategy, in this regard, signals a renewed effort to disrupt NATO's south-eastern flank. Under this prism, the deployment of long-range S-400 and S-300 Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs), S-300 equipped ships and advanced fighter jets across regional flashpoints may prove to be a game changing initiative. The implications of Russia's contemporary strategy could be important for the future of the Eastern Mediterranean, as Moscow's approach appears to be upsetting the regional balance of power. Israel's unchallenged dominance of the skies over Syria and Lebanon is compromised for the first time since 1970, when Russian air-defence forces were deployed to Egypt. The Turkish armed forces, moreover, will struggle to compensate for the Russian game plan, which complicates Ankara's ability to project power over Syria, Iraq and the Aegean Sea. These dispersed airpower "webs" could, finally, restrict NATO's capacity to deploy assets in the region and nullify the credibility of the alliance's anti-ballistic shield. Overall, contemporary developments may enable Russia to challenge American control of a geopolitically vital area that has been in essence uncontested since the end of World War II.

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Russia and the Mediterranean after the Cold War

Ever since the times of the Ottoman expansion and the conquest of Constantinople, Russian leaders felt compelled to retain a strong presence in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, primarily as a means to protect the country's frontiers. After the Second World War, U.S. naval forces in the region were essentially converted to the American 6th Fleet and assumed the mission of protecting Western interests in the oil-rich Middle East. The prospect of "locking" the Soviet fleet in the Black Sea prompted the U.S.S.R. to establish its first permanent naval force in the Eastern Mediterranean. The 5th Mediterranean Squadron of warships managed to become an appreciable counterweight to NATO only in the following decade, however, with the U.S. maintaining a tactical advantage through the deployment of aircraft carriers.²

For the duration of the Cold War, Turkey was a critical component of the Western containment policy against the Soviet Union and its allies. Because of its privileged geopolitical position at the crossroads of three continents and lying at the borders of the Eastern bloc countries, Turkey's armed forces were accorded a prominent role in securing the region by both NATO and the United States. The robust American-Turkish relationship, moreover, bolstered after the 1960s through the cordial partnership between Turkey and Israel, was instrumental in promoting Western interests in this sensitive area.³ Despite the few instances of discord, such as the tensions between Turkey and its historical rival Greece, Washington viewed Ankara as a major stabilising force in the region and a reliable partner that could contribute to regional stability and safeguard the interests of the alliance.

The end of the Cold War unleashed both NATO's and Turkey's latent geopolitical dynamic in the previously inaccessible Eurasian heartland. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the corresponding power vacuum in its former periphery created a window of opportunity for Turkey to improve its relative standing in Central Asia and the Caucasus, thereby reclaiming an important role in Eurasia for the first time since the Ottoman era.⁴ NATO enlargement, already underway in the mid and late 1990s, was regarded as a complementary tool to Ankara's grand strategy.⁵ Despite Turkish concerns that NATO expansion might render the alliance's southern flank comparatively irrelevant, the reach of Euro-Atlantic institutions in a region of

² A. Korolkov, "Why Russia's naval capacity in the Mediterranean is overstated," *Russia Direct*, 5 March 2015, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/why-russias-naval-capacity-mediterranean-overstated> [accessed 4 December 2016].

³ "US-Turkish relations: A review at the beginning of the third decade of the post-Cold War era," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and Center for Strategic Research of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, November 2012, <https://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/26174/uploads>, [accessed 12 January 2017]; N. Schonmann, "Back-Door Diplomacy: The Mistress Syndrome in Israel's Relations with Turkey, 1957-60," in C. Jones and T. Petersen (eds.), *Israel's Clandestine Diplomacies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 85-101.

⁴ N. Criss and S. Güner, "Geopolitical Configurations: The Russia-Turkey-Iran Triangle," *Security Dialogue*, 30:2 (1999), 365-376.

⁵ A. L. Karaosmanoglu, "NATO Enlargement and the South: A Turkish Perspective," *Security Dialogue*, 30:2 (1999), 213.

prime Turkish concern (the Black Sea) was expected to create a “cushion” against Russian resurgence and hence compensate for any loss of status within the alliance.

Turkish analysts anticipated, however, that the exclusion of Russia from Central and Eastern Europe could potentially fuel a more assertive stance in South-Eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean.⁶ That was soon to be realized, as Russians viewed Turkey’s rapidly evolving cultural and security ties with states such as Azerbaijan and Georgia, respectively, with apprehension. Exacerbating Russian concerns, Turkey’s role in the Abkhazian conflict raised the prospect of a destabilizing Turkish involvement in the separatist Republics of Dagestan and Chechnya.⁷ Moscow’s response was to develop or bolster its existing security ties to Syria, Iran, Greece and Cyprus, as a countermeasure to what was perceived to be an expanding Turkish influence across Russia’s “near abroad.”⁸

To this end, the supply of advanced weaponry (and missile systems in particular) became a prominent policy tool. At the time, Russia had already deployed Scud-B missiles in Armenia⁹ and reportedly assisted Iran in developing 2,000 km range missiles, while the S-300 SAM missile system was exported to Syria in 1998.¹⁰ Developed in the 1980s, the S-300 SAMs have the capacity to engage six targets simultaneously, flying as low as ten meters above the ground or as high as maximum aircraft ceilings. The system has a maximum operational range of 150 km for fighter jets and 40 km for ballistic missiles, with tests indicating a very high probability of destroying acquired targets.¹¹ Such specifications imply that the S-300 can be classified as a strategic, as opposed to a tactical, weapon. Thus, besides the need to seek new markets for the Russian armaments industry, Russian weaponry entailed a grand strategic logic that was hard to ignore. In late 1997, the Turkish General Staff prepared a report which accorded the S-300 system a central role in what was viewed as an “offensive ring” engulfing Turkey’s coastline, which included sensitive military as well as civilian assets, such as major ports and oil pipelines.¹²

Russian retrenchment and its aftermath

However ambitious, Russia’s attempt to gain a foothold in the Mediterranean during the 1990s was largely unsuccessful. Syria, probably the most committed Russian ally in the region, engaged in discussions with Israel over the future status of the Golan Heights (under Israeli control since the Six Day War of 1967) while its influence in Lebanon was gradually eroded, leading to the eventual withdrawal of the Syrian

⁶ Karaosmanoglu, “NATO Enlargement,” 217.

⁷ Criss and Güner, “Geopolitical Configurations,” 367.

⁸ M. Ergün Olgun, “Turkey’s Tough Neighbourhood,” in C. H. Dodd (ed.), *Cyprus: the Need for New Perspectives* (Huntingdon: Eothen Press, 1999), 231-260.

⁹ G. Howard, “Scuds Threaten Shaky Stability,” *Jane’s intelligence Review Pointer*, 9:6 (1997), 1.

¹⁰ Criss and Güner, “Geopolitical Configurations,” 368.

¹¹ “Characteristics of the Russian S-300 air defence missiles,” Agence France-Presse, 15 January 1997.

¹² “Missiles and the Eastern Mediterranean,” *Strategic Comments*, 4:5 (1998), 1.

army.¹³ Greece and Cyprus, meanwhile, chose to undertake a major foreign policy adjustment vis-à-vis Turkey in the late 1990s, after major crises in the Aegean Sea (1996) and Cyprus (1998), with the latter directly related to the procurement of S-300 SAMs by the Cypriot government.¹⁴ The moderate government in Athens, led by the Europeanist Costas Simitis, prioritized de-escalation and cooperation with the Turkish leadership, in an effort to diffuse tensions in the Aegean Sea and Cyprus.

The Greek foreign policy shift was reflected in the country's 1996 defence procurement program, drafted shortly after the tense 1996 Aegean Sea crisis. While a number of Russian weapons were selected by the Greek government, the purchase of such systems as long range missiles or Russian fighter jets was disfavoured, as Athens prioritized the "Europeanization" of bilateral issues with Turkey.¹⁵ Initially, Cyprus appeared eager to sustain its close security relationship with Moscow, continuing its unfolding armament program which included T-80 MBTs, BMP-3 AIFVs and BUK M1-2 anti-aircraft systems, among others. The change of attitude in Athens, however, would soon impact on Cypriot security policy. While the highly publicized S-300 purchase by the Cypriot government in 1997 could not be averted, Athens and Nicosia decided to transfer and quietly "store" the touted missile system in the Greek island of Crete, with the first test fire occurring in 2013.¹⁶ While the S-300 cold storage in Crete was then viewed as a tactical retreat by Athens and Nicosia in the face of Turkish escalation, it became evident in subsequent years that Cyprus had decided to substantially scale back its military procurement program so as to avoid similar crises in the future. As a result, Russia's ability to influence these historically friendly states, both strategically located within NATO's southern flank, was severely curtailed.

Russia, at the same time had its own issues to attend to, closer to home. The economic crisis of 1998 dealt a major blow to the Russian economy, which was still recovering from the shock of the Communist collapse. Moscow defaulted on its debt and the national currency was devalued at a time when the upheaval in Chechnya threatened the integrity of the Russian Federation.¹⁷ If there was any doubt about Russia's incapacity to restore its Cold War era geopolitical reach, NATO's Serbia bombing campaign ensured that Moscow would receive the message in a loud and clear manner. At one point during the Kosovo crisis, Russian and NATO troops operated in the same area for the first time after the end of the Cold War, raising

¹³ I. Rabinowich, "Damascus, Jerusalem, and Washington: The Syrian Israeli Relationship as a U.S. Policy Issue," Analysis Paper No. 19 (2009), The Saban Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings Institution, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2009/3/syria-israel-rabinovich/03_syria_israel_rabinovich.pdf [accessed 3 January 2017].

¹⁴ S. Blavoukos and D. Bourantonis, "Policy Entrepreneurs and Foreign Policy Change: The Greek-Turkish Rapprochement in the 1990s," *Government and Opposition*, 47:4 (2012), 597–617.

¹⁵ S. Makris, "Democratic Peace and Greek Foreign Policy: The Case of Helsinki," (in Greek), *The Society for Social and Economic Studies*, 2000, <http://www.ekome.gr/english/default.asp>, [accessed 18 March 2017].

¹⁶ D. Cenciotti, "Hellenic Air Force Fires S-300 Air Defense System for the first time," The Aviationist weblog, 12 January 2014, <https://theaviationist.com/2014/01/12/greece-fires-s300/> [accessed 14 December 2016].

¹⁷ M. Gilman, *No Precedent, No Plan: Inside Russia's 1998 Default* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2010).

concerns that the two sides would actually confront one another.¹⁸ The Russian acknowledgment of NATO primacy, however, showcased in a dramatic way the conventional capability gap between the two former rivals. While Moscow maintained a nuclear deterrent, the state of the country's air and naval fleets indicated that any plans for power projection activities would have to be put on hold, at least temporarily. In the following years, Moscow prioritized internal stability and then focused on deflecting NATO's attempts to expand in the Russian "near abroad." The Georgian and Ukrainian cases took precedence for Vladimir Putin, who perceived NATO expansion as detrimental to Russian security.¹⁹

Moscow returns to the Mediterranean

The Arab Spring movement, a revolutionary wave of protests and civil wars in the Arab world, captured Moscow's attention, as it entailed an element of threat to Russian interests. Russian diplomatic support of the secular, though oppressive, regimes in the Eastern Mediterranean did not prevent the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi from Libya after the NATO-backed military strikes in 2011. The civil war in Syria transferred the "battlefield" to an area of prime concern to Moscow, threatening Russia's closest ally in the region, the Assad regime. In the run up to, and during, the Syrian civil war, Russia provided a friendly voice for the Assad regime in the United Nations and other fora, deflecting decisions and policies deemed harmful to Damascus.²⁰ Initially, however, Moscow stopped short of committing troops in support of the Syrian government. The Syrian turmoil swiftly devolved into chaos, rendering Russia wary of the potential repercussions, with Vladimir Putin asserting that "The collapse of Syria's official authorities will only mobilize terrorists."²¹ The prevailing view in Moscow considered Western interventions in Iraq and North Africa responsible for the rise and expansion of the so-called Islamic State (IS).²²

The West paid little attention to Russian concerns, partly due to the weak military presence of the Russian fleet in the region. The chronic underinvestment in Russia's decaying Black Sea fleet, based in Crimea, had taken its toll on the country's power projection capabilities.²³ This was about to change. On February 2013, Russian

¹⁸ V. Gobarev, "Russia-NATO relations after the Kosovo crisis: Strategic implications," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 12:3 (1999), 1-17.

¹⁹ S. Mydans, "Putin Doubts Expanded NATO Meets New Threats," *The New York Times*, 9 April 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/09/world/putin-doubts-expanded-nato-meets-new-threats.html?_r=0 [accessed 28 November 2016].

²⁰ A. Tilghman and O. Pawlyk, "U.S. vs. Russia: What a War Would Look like between the World's Most Fearsome Militaries," *Military Times*, 5 October 2015, www.militarytimes.com/ [accessed 1 November 2016].

²¹ A. Stent, "Putin's Power Play in Syria: How to Respond to Russia's Intervention," *Foreign Affairs*, 95:1 (January-February 2016), 109.

²² "Russian Envoy to UN: American occupation should be blamed for the rise of ISIS," *RT Network*, 16 September 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/315586-us-occupation-isis-origin/>, [accessed 21 October 2016]; "Putin Blames Foreign Interference for Rise of ISIS in Middle East," *International Business Times*, 26 May 2015, www.ibtimes.com/putin-blames-foreign-interference-rise-isis-middle-east-1938421 [accessed 10 January 2017].

²³ Korolkov, "Why Russia's naval capacity in the Mediterranean is overstated."

Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu emphasised that “the Mediterranean is at the core of all essential dangers to Russian national interests.”²⁴ That year was a turning point for Russian security thinking, as a decision was reached to create a permanent Mediterranean Squadron comprised of ships from the Black Sea fleet.²⁵ The country’s mid-term planning envisaged that by 2020, 132 billion USD (almost a quarter of total projected defence outlays for the period) would be devoted towards upgrading its naval capabilities. By 2014, the Black Sea fleet featured 6 Kilo class submarines, 11,000 marines, and a surface contingent of 42 ships.²⁶ This Mediterranean armada, integrated in the Black Sea fleet, quickly became visible through its activities in the Aegean Sea and adjacent areas. In addition to hosting Russia’s sole aircraft carrier at times, the task force has grown to include more than 10 ships (including warships and support vessels) on a permanent basis.²⁷

Besides Russia’s major naval investment program, the assertion of full control over the Crimean peninsula consolidated a balance of power in the Black Sea that seems particularly favourable for Moscow, taking into consideration that Sevastopol remains the “only naval base in the Black Sea capable of outfitting and dispatching new vessels and military hardware at a strategically significant level.”²⁸ In force projection terms, however, this means little if Russian access to the Mediterranean is “filtered” by the Bosphorus Straits. The Straits “bottleneck,” a historically divisive issue among great powers, remains strategically relevant, as disagreements between Russia and Turkey over the Montreux Treaty, which regulates passage through the Straits, have recently resurfaced. Control of the Straits has been a Russian strategic challenge for quite some time. During the Crimean War (1853-1856), Sir James Graham, First Lord of the Admiralty, considered the Straits to be crucial towards thwarting Russian military power, as they could conceivably be used to “stifle” the Russian navy by restraining it from accessing Mediterranean waters.²⁹

The potential for a future standoff across the Straits, therefore, implies that Russia needs to maintain a robust naval force at all times in Mediterranean waters. Forward basing enables a navy, moreover, to sustain a larger force without increasing fleet size, thereby acting as a force multiplier. The logistical and operational support, however, of the Russian fleet would necessitate berthing agreements with littoral states. This has been a challenging task, admittedly, considering the geopolitical orientation of regional actors. In 2013, the Montenegrin government appears to have

²⁴ E. Inbar, “The New Strategic Equation in the Eastern Mediterranean,” *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, No. 109, (September 2014), 19.

²⁵ P. Felgenhauer, “Moscow Attempts to Extend Its Strategic Influence from the Black Sea to Mediterranean,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 10:43 (2013), www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40556&no_cache=1#.V2Mj5yh96M8 [accessed 1 December 2016].

²⁶ M. Bodner, “Russia’s Black Sea Fleet Will Get 80 New Warships to Repel NATO,” *The Moscow Times*, 23 September 2014.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ R. Gramer, “Changing Tides: Russia’s Growing Stronghold in the Black Sea,” *Foreign Affairs*, 8 February 2016, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2016-02-08/changing-tides [accessed 21 December 2016].

²⁹ C. Badem, *The Ottoman Crimean War: (1853 - 1856)*, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 46-98.

quietly deflected Moscow's approach, aimed at either establishing a naval base at the Adriatic port of Bar or increasing the scope of support provided to Russian fleet units at the country's ports.³⁰ Rumours that Cyprus could host a Russian naval base are regularly making the rounds, only to be denied by the Cypriot government.³¹ After relevant bilateral agreements, Russian ships make use of, without special privileges, the port of Limassol on a frequent basis, while Russian military aircraft may be hosted in Cypriot airports during emergencies and missions of humanitarian nature.³² For both Montenegro and Cyprus, alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions is a core policy pillar, with the former acceding to NATO in 2016 despite domestic divisions on the issue.³³

The procurement of large, power-projecting vessels could partly compensate for Russia's inability to secure bases and logistical support. In this regard, the sole Russian aircraft carrier, the Soviet-era *Admiral Kuznetsov*, has been frequently navigating the Mediterranean, but the high cost of its maintenance and obsolete technology limit its primary function to the display of the Russian flag.³⁴ Moscow acknowledged and tried to rectify this shortcoming by acquiring two new helicopter carriers from France. The procurement of the Mistral-class carriers, amphibious assault ships that can accommodate a load of 16 attack helicopters and up to 900 combat soldiers,³⁵ became swiftly a polarizing issue. The purchase was met with strong resistance from NATO, culminating in the capitulation of the French government and a bitter diplomatic standoff between France and Russia. France finally cancelled the order and the ships were eventually acquired by Egypt.³⁶

Overall, Russia's drive to reassert its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean was qualified by the country's geographic, economic and technological limitations, exacerbated by a well-established NATO presence in the region. The advent of the Arab Spring, moreover, fuelled the belief among analysts that Russia's capacity to influence developments in the area would be further curtailed. Indeed, the 2011 NATO-supported operation in Libya indicated that Moscow's role in regional affairs

³⁰ "Government refuses Russia's request to set up a military base in Montenegro," *Independent Balkan News Agency*, 20 December 2013, <http://www.balkan.eu.com/government-refuses-russiasrequest-set-military-base-montenegro> [accessed 28 December 2016].

³¹ "Cyprus port deal gives Russian navy alternative to Tartus," *Al-Monitor*, 3 March 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/russia-sanctions-europe-nato-economy-cyprus-mediterranean.html> [accessed 10 November 2016].

³² "Russia keen to use military bases in Cyprus," *Cyprus Mail*, 21 January 2015, cyprus-mail.com/2015/01/21/russia-keen-to-use-military-bases-in-cyprus/ [accessed 18 November 2016].

³³ "NATO to Sign Accession Protocol with Montenegro," *Balkan Insight*, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/nato-to-sign-accession-protocol-with-montenegro-05-18-2016> [accessed 7 November 2016].

³⁴ "Troubled Russian Aircraft Carrier Kuznetsov Returns to Sea," *The Moscow Times*, 29 September 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/troubled-russian-aircraft-carrier-kuznetsov-returns-to-sea/508027.html> [accessed 4 January 2017].

³⁵ "Turkey vulnerable to rising Russian power in the Black Sea," *The Jerusalem Post*, 19 April 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/Turkey-vulnerable-to-rising-Russian-power-in-the-Black-Sea-349928> [accessed 22 November 2016].

³⁶ "Egypt Buys Mistral; Kitting Out With KA-52 & KA-52K," *Defence Industry Daily*, 21 September 2016, <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/russia-to-order-french-mistral-lhds-05749/> [accessed 28 December 2016].

was marginal, with the international community ignoring its objections to the ousting of Gaddafi. When Syria became engulfed in civil strife, the Russian naval base in the Syrian port city of Tartus faced the danger of being dismantled as rebels gradually asserted control over the country's coastline. Overall, Russia's position in the Eastern Mediterranean appeared precarious, if not irreversibly compromised.

A novel Mediterranean strategy?

The advent of the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil strife in particular, bestowed Russia with a renewed momentum towards increasing its impact on the Mediterranean. Conditions did not appear particularly favourable. NATO's "tightening of the screws" around the Black Sea and Russia's chronic military underperformance in the region after the Cold War resulted in Moscow taking a backseat during developments in Egypt and Libya. After consolidating its position in the Black Sea, however, through the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014, Russia sought to project power in the Mediterranean in a credible manner. Somewhat contradicting its long-held maritime strategy, Russia moved to deploy long range S-300 surface to air missiles and forwarded advanced fighter aircraft to its Syrian bases. From its Tartus naval base and the Khmeimim air base in Latakia, Russia initiated joint operations with the Syrian army in addition to its own ground and air strikes targeting Syrian rebel groups and IS militants.³⁷ Moscow's Syrian foray, a surprising move for many analysts,³⁸ came at a time of diplomatic isolation and economic crisis, due to the Western-backed sanctions and collapsing oil prices which had a profound effect on the Russian economy.

The Russian intervention in Syria on September 2015 necessitated a commitment of military resources and diplomatic capital without a precedent for post-Cold War Russia. Moscow's military surge included ground attack aircraft and helicopters, naval vessels and marine infantry. At the end of 2016, Vladimir Putin's gamble appeared to have paid off, with the Assad regime recapturing territory from both the IS and Syrian rebel forces, including the major city of Aleppo. While the stabilization of Syria remains elusive, the greatest reward for Russia is the acknowledgement of its role in world affairs. At the same time, Moscow signalled its intention to back its allies with boots on the ground, if necessary, contrasting perceptions regarding the credibility of American commitments in the wider region. Russia's much publicized withdrawal from Syria in 2016 was only partial and primarily aimed at signalling Moscow's desire to re-initiate the diplomatic effort towards a favourable settlement of the Syrian conflict. Analysts quickly pointed out, however, that Moscow's military footprint was meant to be sustained, if not augmented, by the deployment of additional assets in the Syrian bases under Russian administration.³⁹

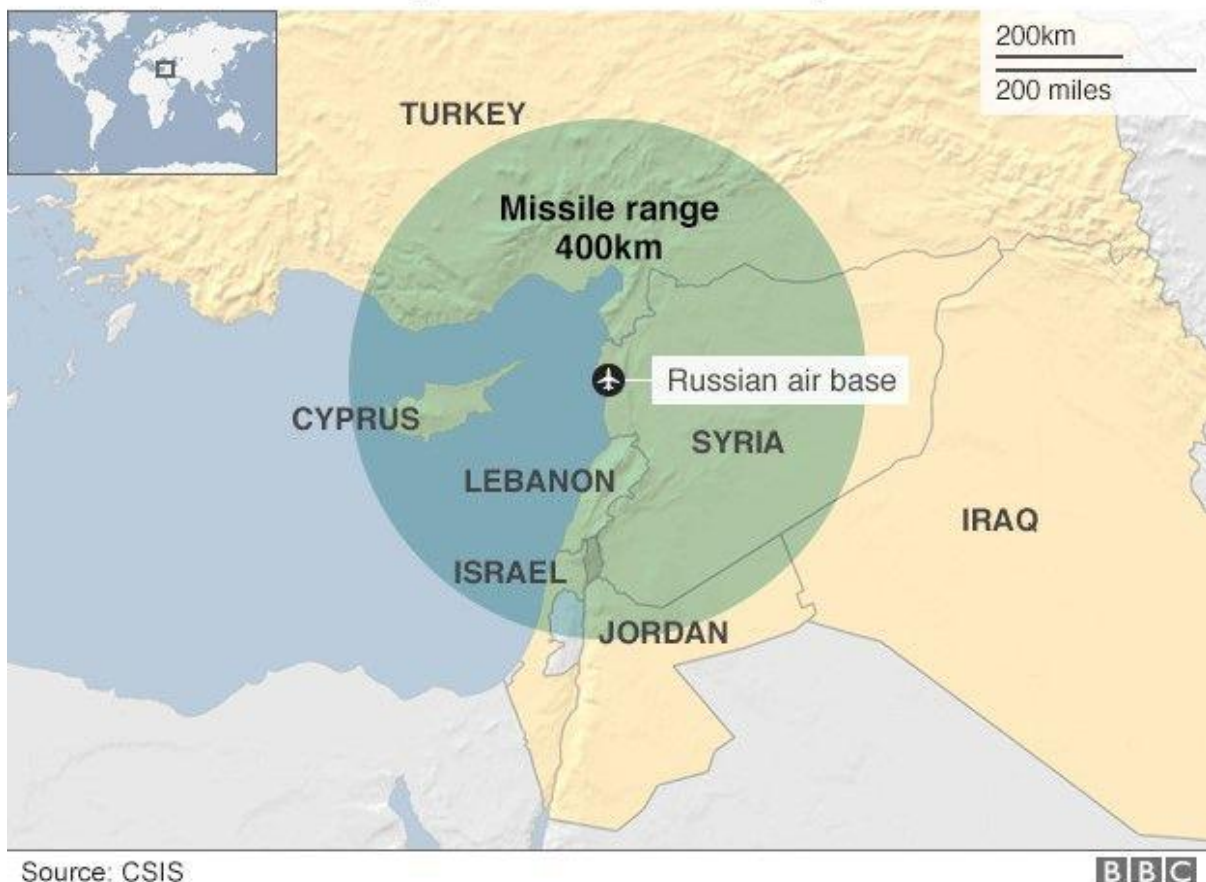
³⁷ R. McDermott, "Russia Initiates 'Out-of- Area Operation' in Syria," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 12:180 (2015), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-initiates-out-of-area-operation-in-syria/> [accessed 19 December 2016].

³⁸ Stent, "Putin's Power Play in Syria."

³⁹ N. Kozhanov, "Russia's 'Withdrawal' from Syria is Nothing of the Kind," Chatham House, 21 March 2016,

Irrespective of diplomatic gains and political signals dispatched through this military endeavour, the conflict in Syria revealed Moscow's unfolding strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean, in essence a fusion of ground and maritime lessons learned from past wars and crises. Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict disclosed the country's evolved security thinking which features two complementary elements: 1) a permanent naval presence that has an adverse effect on NATO's freedom of manoeuvre in the Mediterranean and power projection in the Middle East through the Suez Canal (though U.S. power projection in the Middle East is also ensured through the presence of the 5th Fleet in the Gulf) and 2) the gradual assertion of Russian air superiority over critical parts of the Eastern Mediterranean, which aims to create "pockets of disruption" within, or in proximity of, NATO allies. The latter characteristic appears to be a defining differentiation from Moscow's post-Cold War approaches. We can already see the concrete results of this strategy in parts of Syria, though Kaliningrad and Crimea were the initial testing grounds of this doctrine. The deployment, in this regard, of S-300 equipped ships and the establishment of Russian bases hosting advanced aircraft and S-400 systems in Syrian territory may prove to be a game changer. This is because the Russian strategy creates an anti-access, area denial problem, with the prospect of a no-fly zone over critical locations.

Russian S-400 "Triumph" missile defence system



www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/russia-s-withdrawal-syria-nothing-kind#sthash.4GeYbE1p.dpuf, [accessed 20 March 2017].

Anti-access and area denial refer to war fighting strategies aimed at “preventing an opponent from operating military forces near, into or within a contested region.”⁴⁰ Usually combined as Anti-Access/Area Denial or abbreviated as A2/AD, similar tactics have been enacted in such historical instances, as the Greco-Persian wars in antiquity or the Falklands after they were briefly captured by Argentina.⁴¹ While denying access to enemy forces may be a common goal among combatants, A2/AD strategies are primarily used to denote a more specific approach involving asymmetrical power relationships. In other words, a weaker party adopts A2/AD strategies in order to avoid a confrontation with a more powerful opponent, who may be the defender or the attacker. In this manner, the more powerful actor will be unable to bring its full force in the operational theatre, or maximise its power by moving freely in the contested area. A2/AD strategies have recently come to the spotlight due to their potential applicability in East Asia and specifically in a hypothetical situation where China attempts to forcibly annex Taiwan. China would, under this scenario, keep American forces outside the operational theatre through attrition tactics, instead of directly confronting U.S. air and naval assets (the Chinese term for the doctrine is, in approximation, “active strategic counterattacks on exterior lines”).⁴²

The Russian intervention in Syria could be understood as a first step in the manifestation of an evolving A2/AD strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean. During the initial stages of the Russian operation in Syria, for instance, the majority of fighter aircrafts deployed did not pose a threat to Turkey’s modern F-16 fleet, as the force consisted of Su-25 and Su-24M, both of which possess a limited air to air capability.⁴³ Moscow also avoided initially the deployment of long-range missiles, preferring to protect the newly activated Khmeimim air base in Latakia by Short Range Air Defence (SHORAD) systems such as the Pantsir S-1.⁴⁴ After the Su-24 downing however, Russia deployed Su-34s, which carry Beyond Visual Range (BVR) air to air missiles. A key pillar of an A2/AD envelope, advanced tactical aircraft can perform air interdiction and undertake land and anti-ship attacks against any forces attempting to breach the A2/AD zone.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ S. Tangredi, “A2/AD and Wars of Necessity,” *The National Interest*, 8 December 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/a2-ad-wars-necessity-9524> [accessed 7 January 2017].

⁴¹ D. Shunk, “Area Denial & Falklands War Lessons Learned - Implications for Land Warfare 2030- 2040: After the Army’s Theater Arrival - The Coming Complex Fight,” *Small Wars Journal*, 12 December 2014, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/area-denial-falklands-war-lessons-learned-implications-for-land-warfare-2030-2040-after-the> [accessed 16 December 2016].

⁴² Si-Fu Ou, “China’s A2AD and Its Geographic Perspective,” *Academia Sinica*, 2014, www.rchss.sinica.edu.tw/files/.../1239_4394902e.pdf, [accessed 21/03/2017].

⁴³ C. Kasapoglu, “The Turkish-Russian Military Balance,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Watch* No. 2537, 18 December 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-turkish-russian-military-balance> [accessed 2 June 2016].

⁴⁴ A. Mercouris, “How Russia’s Syria Deployment is Changing the Military Balance in the Eastern Mediterranean,” *Russia Insider News*, <http://russiainsider.com/en/military/howrussiassyriandeploymentchangingmilitarybalance-easternmediterranean/ri11053> [accessed 14 November 2016].

⁴⁵ J. Altman, “Russian A2/AD in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Growing Risk,” *Naval War College Review*, 69:1 (2016), 75.

Moreover, Russia dispatched a missile cruiser off the Eastern Mediterranean coast and transferred the S-400 very long range air and missile defence system to its Latakia air base.⁴⁶ As a result, Russia was in a position to detect, lock and destroy targets deep (200-300 km) into Turkish airspace, thereby establishing superiority within the Syrian air to air operational theatre. While the number of Russian fighter jets deployed may vary, the existence of such advanced missile systems reduces the need for Combat Air Patrol (CAP) missions by Russian aircraft. An electronic jamming system capable of jamming airborne radars and even low orbit satellites completed the tactical picture.⁴⁷ Finally, a number of unmanned aircraft were deployed over Syria with a mission to provide targeting information. In the future, these systems could undertake Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) operations, as part of an ISR pillar against over the horizon NATO forces, complementing what appears to constitute a robust A2/AD strategy.⁴⁸

Technological advancements by the Russian defence industry could also offset some of the geographical and logistical challenges related to the Straits and Russian power projection. Russia's naval doctrine can now ensure that targets are acquired from the safety of the Black Sea or even Russia's extensive riverine system. The use of Sea Launched Cruise Missiles (SLCM) in the Syrian conflict, launched from the Caspian Sea, was aimed at sending a clear signal regarding the capacity of the Russian navy to target hostile ships and land targets at a great distance, thus projecting power in the Eastern Mediterranean without the danger of engaging with hostile forces.⁴⁹ The value of conventional precision-guided, long-range weapons has been demonstrated after 1990 in numerous wars, as unlike nuclear weapons, their use is not limited to the extreme escalation levels associated with nuclear warfare. Their development is also indicative of possible Russian countermeasures against the anti-ballistic missile system NATO is gradually establishing in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean.

In the near future, the Buyan corvettes, which have a displacement of less than 1,000 tons at full load, could sail and launch their cruise missiles from Russian rivers such as the Volga or the Don. They could therefore access the Russian riverine system from the Black Sea and deploy their cruise missiles from locations west of Moscow. The supersonic sea-launched Kalibr missiles, with a range of approximately 1,500 km, pose, for this reason, a substantial challenge to NATO assets in the region, threatening most notably the NATO base at Incirlik, Turkey. The impact of this development indicates that Moscow is in a position to challenge the American primacy on long range, precision-guided strike capabilities. Admiral Aleksandr Vitko, the commander

⁴⁶ Kasapoglu, "The Turkish-Russian Military Balance."

⁴⁷ Mercouris, "How Russia's Syria Deployment is Changing the Military Balance in the Eastern Mediterranean."

⁴⁸ Altman, "Russian A2/AD in the Eastern Mediterranean," 75.

⁴⁹ D. Fielding, "Russia's Cruise Missiles Have Changed Strategic Military Balance," *Russia Insider*, 26 October 2015, <http://russia-insider.com/en/military/how-russias-cruise-missiles-change-strategic-military-balance/ri10730> [accessed 17 November 2016].

of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, has already stated that cruise missile-equipped ships will be permanently sailing in the Mediterranean.⁵⁰

Before the Russian surge in Syria, Moscow had maintained a rather low-key presence in the country, with the exception of the Tartus docking facility. The latter was mainly staffed by civilian contractors and could only host a small number of ships. The recent long term lease agreement with the Syrian government enabled Russia to initiate an expansion of the Tartus base, which will transform it to a major naval base comparable in scale to similar NATO facilities in the Mediterranean.⁵¹ Moreover, the Latakia electronic listening (SIGINT) station was set up during the Cold War but was not designed to host a force of Russian aircraft. Russia's air power projection across the Mediterranean had thus remained a complicated issue, as its fighter jets would have to either cross Southern European, and thus NATO member, countries, or fly through the Caspian Sea, Iran and Iraq, states whose geopolitical orientation has been far from consistent. To complicate matters further, some of the Russian fighter jets, such as the Su-25s do not possess an air-refuelling capability.⁵² The tactical situation appears very different now. By means of a permanently stationed force consisting of attack helicopters and fighter jets, Russia is able to deter other actors from taking unilateral action and mobilize swiftly when necessary, in order to provide, for example, air cover to allied ground forces in the region. Therefore, Russian deterrence is not solely aimed at Syrian opposition forces or even Turkey for that matter. The S-300 missiles operated by the Russian missile cruiser *Moskva* in the Mediterranean, the Su-30 aircraft and the missiles launched from the Caspian Sea against the IS, point to a strong deterrent signal against U.S. and NATO unilateral initiatives in the area.⁵³

Overall, Russia's posture complicates the once unrestrained capacity of NATO and the American 6th Fleet to ensure freedom of manoeuvre in the Eastern Mediterranean and power projection through the Suez Canal in the Middle East. The Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean, moreover, ensures that Moscow's deterrence against Europeans is bolstered, as all E.U. and NATO countries now find themselves within striking distance of Russia's ship-launched cruise and ballistic missiles. Finally, Russian surveillance and electronic warfare assets can now be legally and regularly deployed close to NATO listening stations in Turkey and the British Royal Air-Force base in Cyprus (Akrotiri), further compromising NATO's long-held advantage in intelligence collection and electronic warfare. The Alliance thus finds itself in a vulnerable position during a time of upheaval in the Eastern Mediterranean.

⁵⁰ S. Blank, "The Meaning of Russia's Naval Deployments in the Mediterranean," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 13:44 (2016), www.jamestown.org/regions/middleeast/single/?tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=104&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45169&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=49&cHash=9e74a9148ae27cd202ec93ae68fcc5f9#.V2MicCh96M8 [accessed 5 December 2016].

⁵¹ A. Mercouris, "Russia's military bases in Syria," The Duran website, 9 February 2017, <http://theduran.com/russias-bases-syria/>, [accessed 17 March 2017].

⁵² Mercouris, "How Russia's Syria Deployment is Changing the Military Balance in the Eastern Mediterranean."

⁵³ Ibid.

NATO's potential response

NATO planning had to adjust to Russia's posture in the Mediterranean. In October 2015, the alliance carried out its most ambitious manoeuvres in the Mediterranean with approximately 36,000 troops, 140 aircraft and 60 ships pooled from over 30 countries, some of which, like Australia, are not even NATO members.⁵⁴ The *TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2015* exercise, hosted by Italy, Spain and Portugal, was officially testing the alliance's response mechanisms under a hypothetical scenario of instability in the Horn of Africa. The actual recipient of the message, however, was intended to be Moscow. On 20 October 2015, the American Navy announced that a NATO vessel stationed in the Spanish naval base of Rota had successfully intercepted a ballistic missile (for the first time in a European theatre) as part of a missile defence demonstration. The announcement, which came two weeks after the surprise launch of 26 cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea by Russian warships against Syrian targets, was clearly aimed at signalling NATO's intention to defend the alliance's standing in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In 2016, Jens Stoltenberg, the secretary general of NATO, announced that the alliance is planning to expand its presence in the Mediterranean by transforming the *ACTIVE ENDEAVOUR* operation "into a broader security operation."⁵⁵ The credibility of a U.S. long term commitment in the region should be questioned, however. In multiple occasions after the end of the Cold War, American policymakers emphasized Europe's capacity and responsibility to guarantee its own security and also ensure the stability of its neighbourhood. In the absence, however, of a strong and reliable E.U. security/defence apparatus, NATO has been the cornerstone of the European security architecture. Moreover, the continent's financial stalemate has rendered E.U. leaders reluctant to increase defence spending and assume additional security-related tasks.

The so-called U.S. "pivot to Asia," initiated by the Obama administration, sent a strong signal regarding the future of American grand strategy, corresponding to changing priorities. A first step in this direction was taken through the transfer of U.S. naval assets in the Asia Pacific, aiming at deterring China from adopting policies that could prove detrimental to U.S. interests.⁵⁶ The nature of threats in the Asia Pacific (flashpoints in the South China Sea, Taiwan and the Malacca Straits) places the maritime and air components at the heart of the American strategy in the region, casting into doubt the capacity of the already stretched U.S. military to sustain a deterrent against both Russia and China within an area from the Suez to the Malacca straits. The ascendance of Donald Trump in the American Presidency may add further fuel to this change of priorities. Washington's rudimentary participation in the

⁵⁴ E. Villarejo, "Trident Juncture: Toward a Mediterranean Cold War?" *Defense News*, 28 October 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/warfare/2015/10/25/trident-juncture-toward-mediterranean-cold-war/74412878/> [accessed 31 October 2016].

⁵⁵ Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at joint press point with incoming SACEUR General Curtis Scaparrotti, 4 May 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_130535.htm [accessed 7 July 2016].

⁵⁶ C. Le Mièrre, "America's Pivot to East Asia: The Naval Dimension," *Survival*, 54:3, 2012, pp. 81-94.

diplomatic efforts to end the Syrian conflict in recent months appears consistent with a gradual U.S. disengagement from the Eastern Mediterranean.

The aforementioned U.S. strategic shift could be part of the historical “ebb and flow” of American involvement in Europe, though it hardly seems like a short term caprice. From the first Gulf War in 1990-91 to the “War on Terror” a decade later, the U.S. has been steadily adjusting its perception of the Mediterranean; from a confrontation stage against the Soviet Union, the region became a forward launch pad or even a transit point towards the Gulf States and the Indian Ocean, where significant American interests lie. The waning of American dependence on Gulf energy resources can only accelerate the U.S. decoupling from the region. As of 2016, the 6th Fleet has a single command ship and four destroyers permanently assigned to the force, all based at Rota, Spain, with only rotational presence in the Eastern Mediterranean from ships passing through the area on the way to, or back from, the Middle East.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, there is always at least one *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer in the area as part of NATO’s anti-ballistic defence umbrella.

The inconvenient reality is that the rest of the NATO allies have been doing little to compensate for the U.S. realignment; the drastic reduction of European defence spending and the commitment of NATO assets away from the Mediterranean (NATO ships take part in the *OCEAN SHIELD* operation in the Indian Ocean for instance) have created a hard to ignore security vacuum. In the short term, the United States will most likely transfer combat ships and perhaps aircraft from other operational theatres, though this strategic “band aid” should only partially alleviate the alliance’s credibility problem. In the long term, European littoral states would need to take the helm, both politically and militarily, in a hypothetical regional confrontation with Russia. Even if a political decision is reached by the Europeans to rise to the occasion, their capability shortcomings will be hard to overcome. The lack of ASW capabilities of regional navies for instance, with the exception of the Italian FREMM frigates, puts regional players at a disadvantage, considering the strengths of the Russian navy.⁵⁸

Russia, in this respect, appears to have taken the initiative in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Syrian conflict showcases that the security order in the region is now contested. This is a major turn of events, as until recently, most analysts regarded Russian military capabilities with disdain.⁵⁹ The *Financial Times* admitted that “Russia has not had any sizeable presence in the Mediterranean since the end of the cold war. And a lack of investment until recently in its decaying Black Sea fleet, based in Crimea, had led many strategic military planners to overlook the entire theatre as a possible source of concern when it came to Moscow.”⁶⁰ Alexander Vershbow, NATO’s Deputy Secretary General, clearly articulates the alliance’s adjusted

⁵⁷ Altman, “Russian A2/AD in the Eastern Mediterranean,” 73.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 81.

⁵⁹ F. S. Gady, “How the West Underestimated Russia’s Military Power,” *The Diplomat*, 17 October 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/how-the-west-underestimated-russiasmilitary-power> [accessed 18 July 2016].

⁶⁰ “Russia’s Syria strategy poses challenge to NATO in Mediterranean,” *The Financial Times*, 21 October 2015.

perception of Russia when he characterizes Russia's presence south of the Bosphorus as "disruptive," adding that NATO needs to "think about the broader consequences of this build up in the Eastern Mediterranean and the capacity of these airbases."⁶¹

Implications for the Eastern Mediterranean

It is worth noting that NATO allies have recently devoted considerable resources in their effort to understand Russian intentions and predict its future behavior.⁶² The comprehensive reform of NATO's doctrine and structure were primarily aimed at monitoring and anticipating potential challenges to Central and Eastern European countries.⁶³ Following the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict in 2014, the American political establishment intensified this effort, committing substantial assets to the scrutiny of Moscow's motivations and capabilities.⁶⁴ Tensions over Ukraine rekindled threat perceptions in the highest echelons of power within the Atlantic Community, eliciting the expectation that Russia would imminently target the Baltic States and perhaps Poland.⁶⁵ Moscow, however, chose to promote a "frozen" conflict scenario in 2015, in which Eastern Ukrainian provinces would avoid severing ties with Kiev. In a surprising turn of events, Odessa, a Black Sea port of great strategic and symbolic value to Russia, did not become a flashpoint for separatist forces.⁶⁶

This does not necessarily imply that the competition between NATO and Russia in Eastern Europe is over. It may be indicative, however, of the "transfer" of the East-West rivalry into a more contested theatre, that of the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia's direct involvement in the quagmire of the Syrian conflict entailed a robust commitment of political and military capital during a year of financial stress and diplomatic isolation for Moscow.⁶⁷ A critical question is whether Russia aims to take the next step and upgrade its missile defence strategy. An airpower web consisting of advanced fighter jets and ballistic missiles may, in the mid-term, restrict NATO's capacity to deploy

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² "NATO Members Up Defense Spending In Face Of New Threats," *Aviation Week Network*, 16 June 2015, <http://aviationweek.com/paris-air-show-2015/nato-members-defense-spending-face-new-threats> [accessed 29 December 2016].

⁶³ "Wales Summit Declaration," NATO, 5 September 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm [accessed 31 December 2016]; "European Defense in the Spotlight," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 26 June 2015, <http://csis.org/publication/european-defense-spotlight>, [accessed 31 December 2016].

⁶⁴ "NATO's military response to Russia: November 2016 update," House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper 07276, 3 November 2016, <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7276#fullreport> [accessed 12 December 2016].

⁶⁵ "Russia a threat to Baltic states after Ukraine conflict," *The Guardian*, 19 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/feb/19/russia-a-threat-to-baltic-states-after-ukraine-conflict-warns-michael-fallon> [accessed 2 January 2017]; "Russia's game in the Baltic Sea region: A Polish perspective," European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) Wider Europe Forum, www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_russias_game_in_the_baltic_sea_region_a_polish_perspective381 [accessed 6 January 2017].

⁶⁶ "In Odessa, anxiety over Russia's next move," *USA Today*, 5 March 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/03/05/odessa-ukraine-anxiety-over-russia-next-move/24363957> [accessed 6 January 2017].

⁶⁷ U. Dekel and Z. Magen, "Russian Involvement in Syria: What has Changed, and the Significance for Israel," *INSS Insight*, 752 (2015), <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=10699> [accessed 4 January 2017].

assets in the Mediterranean, with Russia essentially challenging American control of a vital area that has been uncontested since the end of the Second World War. This would be a major development for the entire region as a Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) system, while defensive in nature, has the capacity to overturn an existing balance of power by undercutting other states' deterrent capabilities, or by providing coverage for offensive forces. During a crisis between Russia and NATO, Moscow could take advantage of deployed SAMs and declare a no-fly zone or, alternatively, an air-defence identification zone in order to prevent hostile forces from reaching Syria for example. Under this scenario, the credibility of NATO and its members would be put to the test.

Russia's Mediterranean buildup may equally alter the posture of regional actors, whose conduct may be critical in times of crisis. The role of Turkey and Egypt, both in control of choke point access in the Black and Red Seas respectively, is far from certain under a hypothetical crisis scenario, even though the former is a full NATO member. Bulgaria's refusal to take part in the establishment of a permanent NATO-led force in the Black Sea signifies the reluctance of regional actors to antagonize Moscow in an area of historical importance for Russian interests.⁶⁸ Problematic access to the Black and Red Seas, or even a delay of reinforcements in the course of a security crisis could have detrimental effects on NATO's deterrence credibility, leading other states in the region, such as Greece and Italy, to further question their commitment to NATO goals and priorities.

Israel's unchallenged dominance of the skies over Syria and Lebanon, moreover, could be compromised for the first time since 1970, when Russian air defence forces were deployed to Egypt in what is referred to in Israel as the "War of Attrition."⁶⁹ Throughout the Syrian crisis, Moscow and Jerusalem maintained an intensive dialogue over developments in Syria. The goal was to ensure that Israeli and Russian fighter jets would not collide, as the Israeli Air-Force undertook operations in Syria, striking targets associated with Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based militant group which dispatched forces in support of the Assad regime. While Israelis are historically reluctant to provide information over their military operations, the maintenance of an open line between Putin and Netanyahu indicates that Israel may be willing to accept a Russian presence in the region.⁷⁰ It remains to be seen whether this will still be the case if Russia upgrades its capabilities in areas of Israeli concern. A question, finally, emerges regarding a potential collaboration between Russian forces in Syria and

⁶⁸ "Bulgaria refuses to join NATO Black Sea fleet against Russia," EurActiv website, www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/bulgaria-refuses-to-join-nato-black-sea-fleet-against-russia/ [accessed 17 October 2016].

⁶⁹ "The War of Attrition (1968-70)," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/History/Pages/The%20War%20of%20Attrition%20-1968-70.aspx> [accessed 23 January 2017].

⁷⁰ S. Ramani, "Why Russia and Israel are Cooperating in Syria," Huffington Post, 23 June 2016, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-russia-and-israel-are-cooperating-in-syria_us_576bdb68e4b083e0c0235e15, [accessed 20 March 2017].

irregular groups such as the Hezbollah, which could assume the role of a Russian proxy in the region, creating a rift between Russia and Israel.

Finally, a Russian air defence umbrella in the Eastern Mediterranean brings back memories of the S-300 crisis in Cyprus. In 1997, the Cypriot effort to upgrade the island's anti-aircraft capabilities through the purchase of the S-300 SAM system led to a tense crisis that was resolved when the missiles were stored in the Greek island of Crete. The Cypriot rationale for procuring the missiles was tactical, as well as political. Since the establishment of Cyprus as a sovereign state in 1960, and particularly after the 1974 Turkish invasion and partition of the island, successive Cypriot governments have exerted a consistent effort to ensure the survivability of the Republic through military acquisitions. A pervasive sense of insecurity, combined with a deadlock in bi-communal negotiations, led to a more assertive security policy which lasted for approximately a decade (1989-1998), epitomised by the Integrated Defence Space pact with Greece. Overall, Cyprus aimed at challenging the local balance of capabilities by establishing a credible deterrent force, which featured a robust air defence component.⁷¹ The S-300 "fiasco," as it is remembered among political circles, led to a drastic Cypriot security policy adjustment⁷² which, to this day, emphasizes a minimum deterrence capability and the avoidance of escalation. It is thus highly unlikely that Cyprus will consider another arms build-up anytime soon, even though the Republic finds itself amidst a tense geopolitical environment.

Turkey's long term response to Russia's conduct in the Eastern Mediterranean, however, remains enigmatic. While Russia and Turkey appear to have established an uneasy understanding regarding the Syrian conflict, the Russian A2/AD strategy may well lead to further antagonisms between the two neighbours. In the coming years, Russia could expand its network of missile systems in the area, through establishing bases armed with S-300/400 SAMs or even more advanced systems in Syria or Egypt, for example. Another possibility is a long term presence of S-300 equipped Russian naval assets in the vicinity. Moscow has indeed announced that its Kirov class battle cruisers will be equipped with a naval variant of the S-400 by 2022.⁷³ These developments would imply that Cyprus, or at least parts of the Cypriot airspace, could be covered by a Russian air defence umbrella.

Considering Turkey's undisputed air superiority over the island, this development could affect the regional security outlook in a dramatic way. The Turkish reaction to the Cyprus S-300 crisis between 1997 and 1998 was indicative of the potential impact of such developments. Throughout the crisis, the Turkish Ministry of Defence compared its obligation to prevent the S-300 deployment with that of

⁷¹ E. Goldstein, "Greece: The Imperatives of Geopolitics," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* vol. 22, 1998, p. 168.

⁷² "Cypriot government announces moratorium on weapons purchases," Agence France Presse, 14 January 1999.

⁷³ D. Majumdar, "Russia's Monster Battlecruisers Are Getting Hypersonic Anti-Ship Missiles," *The National Interest*, 19 February 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russias-monster-battlecruisers-are-getting-hypersonic-anti-15263> [accessed 22 January 2017].

Washington to stop the installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1963.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, it was extremely difficult for Ankara to antagonize Russia's attempt to install its missiles. In August 1997, Turkish authorities stopped and searched the Egyptian vessel *Al-Qusair*, after allegedly receiving information that the ship was carrying (S-300) missile parts.⁷⁵ In this manner, Turkey indicated its opposition to the deal, but chose to avoid a direct provocation to Moscow by selecting a ship that did not carry the Russian flag. It is highly unlikely that Russian assets, whether located in a base or on board a vessel, would be targeted by the Turkish armed forces.

On a final note, Russia's capacity to challenge and surprise the West in recent years should lead both NATO and the E.U. to reassess the way strategic assessments are conducted. Despite its relative military and financial weakness, Moscow has proven capable of drawing accurate inferences about Western intentions and capabilities. This enables its policy-planners to engage in brinkmanship, strategic surprise and the gradual erosion of NATO deterrence in Europe. Even if one uses the label of opportunism to characterize Russian behavior, opportunity is a function of capability, to an extent. This apparent failure of the West could potentially be attributed to a rather simplistic image of Russia as an unpredictable and disruptive actor in international politics. While Russia cannot be classified as a liberal democracy, it possesses the requisite institutional depth and memory which enable the country to rationally internalize lessons learned from past conflicts, adapting its strategy to changing conditions. In that sense, Moscow behaves as a reactive, not a disruptive force and the evolution of Russia's Mediterranean strategy is a case in point. In order to account for Russia's behavior, therefore, a refined, more nuanced narrative is necessary, one that captures its ability to adapt to changing circumstances and at the same time surprise its antagonists when its interests are not taken into consideration.

⁷⁴ M. Demetriou, "On the long road to Europe and the short path to war: Issue-linkage politics and the arms build-up on Cyprus," *Mediterranean Politics*, 3:3 (1998), 44.

⁷⁵ "Tension escalates over transfer of S-300 missiles," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 9 March 1997, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/tension-escalates-over-transfer-of-s-300-missiles.aspx?pageID=438&n=tension-escalates-over-transfer-of-s-300-missiles-1997-09-03 [accessed 14 January 2017].