



Moscow's Strategic Obsession with the Eastern Mediterranean: Lessons from pre-Cold-War history

MEDITERRANEAN PROGRAMME

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Summary

- There is a longstanding perception that the Russian Federation, and its historical predecessors (the Russian Empire and the USSR), desired control of the Eastern Mediterranean.
- The British Empire saw the region as an essential lifeline, connecting the British Isles to India and the dominions of Oceania through the Suez Canal. Britain in the 19th century pursued a policy of directly defending the Canal while also supporting a proxy (primarily the Ottoman Empire) to form a counterweight to the Russian threat.
- This policy would remain unchanged right up to the beginning of the Cold War. Britain went to great lengths during World War Two to ensure that, following the defeat of the Axis, Greece remain oriented away from the USSR. This included coming to difficult terms with the Soviet Union over the future of Europe and militarily confronting Greek left-wing guerrillas.
- In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been a significant concentration of Russian and NATO warships in the Eastern Mediterranean as Russia recognizes the critical importance attached by NATO to the region and hopes to achieve disproportionate gains with a threatening presence there.
- These include the complete control of the Black Sea, the pre-occupation of NATO resources in a region peripheral to Russian coastal security, and rendering regional energy sources vulnerable.

Introduction

It is self-evident that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to the tensest standoff between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance and the Russian Federation since the end of the Cold War.

In late February 2022, mere days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, two Russian Slava-class cruisers (the *Marshal Ustinov* and the *Varyag*) were sailing near Greek waters and off the Syrian coast in the East Mediterranean; they were there to impede the work of NATO carrier strike groups in the area and deter any intervention. Both this show of force by the Russian Navy's Mediterranean Squadron, a herald of things to come, and President Vladimir Putin's longstanding efforts to expand the Russian fleet's base of Tartus, can be seen as aspects of the latest round in a struggle for control of the Eastern Mediterranean that began almost 250 years ago.

It is self-evident that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to the tensest standoff between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance and the Russian Federation since the end of the Cold War. While it is still too early to estimate the full ramifications of the invasion, history can be a valuable guide in efforts to glean lessons from the past and identify the dangers facing the region today. In this case, there has long existed a perception in the Anglo-American world that the Russian Federation and its predecessors (the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union) have been consistently attempting to establish a strong presence in the Mediterranean since the late 18th century.

It should be noted that this perception was not limited to Foreign Office mandarins and students of geopolitics and International Relations, and was in fact widespread in British society just before the turn of the 19th century. In fact, the chorus of *McDermott's War Song*, the etymological root of jingoism, rallied support for British sailors in the Mediterranean with the words:

"We don't want to fight but by Jingo if we do, we've got the ships, we've got the men' we've got the money too. We've fought the bear before, and while we're Britons true, the Russians shall not have Constantinople."

This paper will attempt to provide a brief, but hopefully thorough, analysis of interactions in the Mediterranean between the British Empire, Russia (in all its iterations) and, to a lesser degree, the United States prior to the Cold War. It will then seek to use this historical context to examine the present situation in the region.

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British Control of the Mediterranean in the long 19th and early 20th century

While the British had been heavily involved in the Mediterranean since the end of the Napoleonic Wars, their focus on the region would only increase following the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869. The Canal, along with technological advancements in steamship technology, marked a decisive shift in the routes taken by British ships bound for India, the rest of Asia and the Antipodes, as the Canal almost halved the distance to the Indian subcontinent; within 15 years of its opening, over 85% of the total value of trade between Britain and India would be passing through it. This also proved a welcome strategic addition as, after the Delhi Mutiny of 1857, the creation of the British Raj meant the Crown was directly ruling the Indian subcontinent. The Suez Canal, and by extension the Eastern Mediterranean, was soon perceived as the lifeline to British possessions in the East.

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The emerging importance of the Canal to British planning was first apparent during the last Ottoman-Russian War of 1875-1878. During the conflict, the British warned both the Russian and Ottoman empires that the neutrality of the Suez Canal would be vigorously defended. This soon became a priority not only for the Royal Navy, whose Mediterranean Fleet formed one of its largest squadrons, but also for the Foreign Office and Imperial planners.

However, by the end of the 19th century, Britain had grown tired of nursing the “sick man of Europe”, having defended the Ottoman Empire as a bulwark against Russian expansion. Instead, Britain now looked to Greece to form a counterweight to Russian ambitions, with Harold Nicolson of the Foreign Office stating that: “The idea which prompted our support of Greece was no emotional impulse but the natural expression of our historical policy; the protection of India and the Suez Canal. For a century we had supported Turkey as the first line of defence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey had proven a broken reed and we fell back on the second line, the line from Salamis to Smyrna.”¹

What British planners before the First World War had not accounted for was the October Revolution, while Greek ambitions of becoming the dominant regional power would be shattered in the brutal Greco-Turkish War of 1920-1922 and the disastrous Asia Minor campaign that would haunt Greek society for generations.

Britain's traditional enemy, the Russian Empire, ceased to be a factor in the Mediterranean as it was consumed by internal conflict and beset with turmoil during the Russian Civil War. Torn apart and internationally shunned, the Soviet Union would take years to recover and be in a position to once again threaten the balance of power in the Mediterranean. The turmoil even affected the Soviet shipping that used the Straits in this period: indicatively, Soviet tonnage passing through the Straits in 1924 was only 172,103 tons as compared to the 1,428,000 of 1913.²

British manoeuvrings throughout this period confirm that British policy was dependent on having a proxy state in the region to protect its interests from the threat of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.

Politically, Britain established its primacy when the Lausanne Convention of 1923 established the Straits as a demilitarised zone despite objections by both the Turkish and Soviet governments, with the latter complaining that the new Convention was a threat to the USSR's “security and vital interests”.³ It is conceivable that, with the Convention in place and until the re-emergence of the Soviet Union in the 1930s as an active participant on the international stage, British defensive planning was less concerned with the Russian Black Sea Fleet than it had been for almost a century.

British manoeuvrings throughout this period confirm that British policy was dependent on having a proxy state in the region to protect its interests from the threat of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. This policy would remain unchanged until as late as 1936 and the signing of the Montreux Convention regarding the Straits, where Britain played a leading role in once again ensuring that the Russian Fleet stayed behind the Dardanelles.

World War II and its aftermath

British involvement in Axis-occupied and subsequently liberated Greece, 1940-1947, can be seen as a continuation of the longstanding British policy set out in the first part of this paper. This is evidenced most clearly by an examination of the relations between the

¹ Michael Llewellyn Smith, *Ionian Vision: Greece in Asia Minor, 1919-1922*, new edn. (London, Hurst & Company, 1998) p. 170.

² RG 84, Box 6, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland.

³ *Ibid.*

British government and EAM (National Liberation Front), the communist-led resistance organization. The two had cordial relations initially and even co-operated in the Greek resistance but, as the end of the war loomed and post-war ambitions became more pressing, this relationship deteriorated rapidly. By December 1944, relations between the two sides had broken down completely, resulting in open conflict between British troops and left-wing guerrillas only a few months after the liberation of Greece.

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The main issue for British planners was EAM's perceived alignment with the Soviet Union: an EAM-dominated Greece would, they feared, present an open invitation to Russia to finally achieve its longstanding goal of gaining unimpeded access to the Mediterranean. British wartime archives document multiple instances of EAM being considered synonymous with Russian expansion; this attitude is best exemplified, perhaps, by a 1944 War Cabinet memorandum which states that "given Russian relations with EAM, it might add Greece to the post-war Balkan Slav bloc which now showed signs of forming under Russian influence and from which we were anxious to keep Greece detached".⁴

To this end, the British government sought to reach an understanding with their Soviet counterparts to ensure that the USSR would not 'meddle' in Greece. An internal British memo stressed that "It should therefore be an essential part of our immediate plans for the Foreign Office to secure an agreement from the Russians that they will abstain from interference in Greek affairs [...] I suggest that there may still be time to make a deal with the Russians about Greece in exchange for our gesture concerning Rumania."⁵ A deal was eventually struck on May 5, 1944 with the British telling the Soviets that "if they wished us to allow them to take the lead in Romania that they should be prepared to reciprocate by allowing His Majesty's Government to do likewise in Greece".⁶

This would continue into October 1944, when the Soviet push into the Balkans, which included the occupation of Bulgaria by the Red Army, created significant unease in Whitehall. Perhaps to ward off any Soviet interest in moving further south, Winston Churchill informed Joseph Stalin that, as Britain was already preparing to liberate Greece, there was no need for Soviet troops to advance into the country. The Soviets acquiesced, keeping to the earlier agreement.

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However, this did little to allay the fears of the British government, which was still very anxious about Soviet intentions. Instead, Churchill decided to fly over war-torn Europe to Moscow, meet with Stalin in person, and forge an agreement. While Greece might not have been the only reason for the 'Tolstoy' Conference, it was very high on the British agenda.

The result of this meeting became known as the 'Percentages Agreement', under which Britain would have 90% influence in Greece. During the meeting, Churchill hoped "that Marshal Stalin would let him have the first say in Greece".⁷ To this end, the British were willing to sacrifice Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Eden believed that "we must stake our claim to a predominant position in Greece, but we cannot do this without selling out over Bulgaria".⁸ The Soviet Union, being fully aware of the importance the British assigned to Greece, exacted the maximum price in its negotiations. A memorandum sent to Molotov

⁴ PREM 3 212/1, The National Archives (TNA), London.

⁵ HS5/155, TNA.

⁶ Richard Clogg, 'The Greek Government in Exile, 1941-1944', *The International History Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July, 1979), p. 397.

⁷ Albert Resis, 'The Churchill-Stalin Secret 'Percentages' Agreement on the Balkans, October 1944', *The American Historical Review* Vol. 83 (April, 1978) p. 372.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

by Ivan Maiskii, the Soviet ambassador in London, highlighted that “the USSR is interested in Greece much less than in other Balkan countries, whereas England in contrast, is seriously interested in Greece”.⁹

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The decision to prioritize control of Greece was undoubtedly related to British planning in the wider Mediterranean. “It is assumed that our long term policy towards Greece is to retain her as a British sphere of influence and that Russian dominated Greece would not be in accordance with British strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean,” stated one government memo.¹⁰ David Talbot-Rice, a pre-eminent member of the British intelligence community, concurred, writing: “The whole of our policy in the Balkans was associated with the major British aim of securing the Mediterranean as a British highway and that, in furtherance of this policy it was the object of HMG to orientate the Mediterranean countries towards Britain and away from Russia”.¹¹ For many contemporary observers, both British and American, Greece had become once again a link in the defence of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Straits against Russian expansionism.

British and American officials also focused on the issue of the Dardanelles Straits. Indeed, it is arguable that one of the British government’s prime motivations when negotiating the future of Greece at the Tolstoy conference was the desire to reassure the Turkish government that Britain retained a dominant position in the Mediterranean.¹² Even its significant intervention in Greece stemmed from Britain’s fixation on the Straits and fear that if the Soviets established a presence in Greece, it “would fit in with any policy they may have or may develop which is aimed at establishing themselves on the Northern shores of the Dardanelles and in the Aegean. With Russian troops to east and west, Turkey would soon succumb to Russian domination”.¹³

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This was later echoed in 1946 by influential MI5 operative Guy Liddell, who wrote that the Soviet “attempt to isolate Turkey by developing Azerbaijan independence, stirring up the Kurds, support of Bulgarian claims to the Aegean and Greek Left-Wing agitation for eastern Thrace can be interpreted as part of Russia’s traditional desire to control the Straits”.¹⁴ American observers agreed that “acquisition of all or a substantial part of Northern Greece would give the Russians one outlet on the Aegean and result in the strategic investment of the coveted Dardanelles [...] Appeasement on the issue of Northern Greece would involve the surrender of an important bastion of security in the Mediterranean”.¹⁵

To ensure Greece would not become a Soviet satellite, both Britain and the United States would actively intervene when the country found itself engulfed in fratricidal conflict once more during the Greek Civil War in 1946-1949. Greece was one of the earliest battlegrounds of the Cold War and the first instance of direct military intervention by the United States during this period.

In the immediate run-up to the Cold War, both the British Empire and the United States became pre-occupied with the threat of Soviet expansion into the Mediterranean. The two went to great lengths to ensure that the Soviet Black Sea fleet could not threaten critical

⁹ Geoffrey Roberts, ‘Moscow’s Cold War on the Periphery: Soviet Policy in Greece, Iran and Turkey, 1943-8’, *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 46 (2011) p. 60.

¹⁰ Peltekis Archive, Benaki Museum, Athens.

¹¹ HS5/154, TNA.

¹² Fraser J. Harbutt, *Yalta 1945: Europe and America at the Crossroads* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014) pp. 201-202.

¹³ Peltekis Archive, Benaki Museum.

¹⁴ FO 1093/542, TNA.

¹⁵ RG 84, Box 7, NARA.

The two went to great lengths to ensure that the Soviet Black Sea fleet could not threaten critical supply lifelines, prioritizing Greece over Eastern and Central Europe while also conducting military operations against Greek insurgents.

Russian and Soviet leaderships have always been keenly aware of the importance NATO and its members attach to the Eastern Mediterranean and may seek to extract the maximum benefit from this sense of vulnerability.

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The situation today

It was always highly unlikely for several reasons that the ongoing situation in Ukraine, as well as the stand-off we can expect in its aftermath, would not spill out into the Mediterranean. Primarily, as shown in the earlier sections of the paper, Russian and Soviet leaderships have always been keenly aware of the importance NATO and its members attach to the Eastern Mediterranean and may seek to extract the maximum benefit from this sense of vulnerability. Indeed, Russian planners may have realized that threatening as critical a NATO lynchpin as the Mediterranean may actually be a far more effective and efficient strategy than the pursuit of a globally active 'blue-water' navy to challenge the naval superiority of the United States.¹⁶

In fact, we have already witnessed an alarming concentration of warships in the area. Both before and since the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian navy has been steadily reinforcing its Mediterranean squadron with ships from the Northern and Pacific Fleets (including the aforementioned *Varyag* and *Marshal Ustinov* cruisers); numbering approximately 20 warships, it is now a sizeable threat. As the Russian navy continues to make its presence felt in the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean, NATO has responded by stationing three carrier strike groups in the area (specifically the USS *Harry S. Truman*, the FS *Charles De Gaulle*, and the ITS *Cavour*).

Clearly, the Russian navy has already succeeded in one of its primary goals. By maintaining a threatening presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, it has not only diverted NATO attention away from the Black Sea (giving it almost free rein in the basin), it has also tied down significant allied resources in a region peripheral to Russian coastal defence.

Undoubtedly, Russia has laid strong foundations for the defence of the Black Sea coast from hostile action: its four battalions of S-400 missile defence systems, Pantsir missiles, as well as the Bastion and Bal coastal defence systems it has deployed, have created an anti-access/area-denial zone (A2/AD) that extends a significant way towards the Turkish coast. Apart from defending the southern flank of Russia, these defences also provide an additional advantage: they shield newer Russian ships in the Black Sea which are armed with the Kalibr cruise missile. Already been used to great effect in Ukraine, this missile has a range of approximately 2,500 kilometres and can carry a nuclear warhead, meaning it can threaten strikes against targets in western Europe, including London and Paris. The Black Sea would therefore not only be a difficult front to penetrate in case open war breaks out, it would also act as a forward base for the deployment of nuclear deterrent elements at a range that will minimize the effectiveness of European early-warning systems.

It is thus striking to consider that, at a time when Europe has witnessed one of the largest troop mobilizations in recent history (with more than 40,000 active NATO troops in Eastern Europe in comparison to fewer than 5,000 a year ago), NATO has been relatively inactive in the Black Sea; indeed, the only reinforcements in the region have been a few thousand troops stationed in Romania and Bulgaria.

NATO's naval presence in the Black Sea has always been very limited, constrained as it is by the Montreux Convention, which remains the single most important factor governing

¹⁶ Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's Naval Capabilities in the Mediterranean," *Marshall Center Security Insight*, no. 35, July 2019

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the military interconnectivity of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Strict Turkish adherence to the Convention means that non-Black Sea powers can have a limited presence in the area for a maximum of 21 days, primarily for exercises (much to the chagrin of the Russian government). However, there are still ways to overcome the restrictions of the Montreux Convention including a rotating allied task force that could comprise two to three frigates and several auxiliary ships, including anti-submarine surface ships.¹⁷

Additionally, it was hoped for many years that NATO maintaining only a small Black Sea fleet would avoid provoking the Russian Federation. When this hope proved false, NATO's naval prospects in the region faced another hurdle: perhaps playing to pro-Russian sentiment in the country among other considerations, the previous Bulgarian administration of Boyko Borisov refused to participate in a proposed joint NATO Black Sea Fleet in 2016. However, even with the situation in Ukraine, Romanian appeals, and Kiril Petkov's new pro-Western government in Bulgaria, there has been little obvious movement in the region on this issue. And while one may point to the fact that Turkey has kept the Straits closed to all warships since February 2022, this is most likely a legal overreach, since Article 20 of the Montreux Convention guarantees navigation by neutral ships; the total closure could thus be challenged by NATO should it be truly resolved to deploy a rapid response force in the area.¹⁸

To what extent NATO considers the Black Sea too dangerous to operate in due to the strong fortifications of the Crimean Peninsula remains an open question. It may illustrate that advances in missile technology have made sailing in such a limited space a significant strategic liability for all Black Sea navies (a development best exemplified, ironically, by the fate of the *Moskva* cruiser). However, it is also clear that, in committing three carrier strike groups, NATO is also pre-occupied with the Mediterranean.

It may not be a coincidence that efforts to renovate and expand the Russian naval base in Tartus, Syria, which is now a thorn in NATO's flank, began in 2013, shortly before the annexation of Crimea.

It may not be a coincidence that efforts to renovate and expand the Russian naval base in Tartus, Syria, which is now a thorn in NATO's flank, began in 2013, shortly before the annexation of Crimea. In 2012, Ruslan Aliev of the Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST) told the BBC that: "Tartus is not a real naval base. It is just a point on the map to replenish food and water and carry out some occasional repairs. There are a maximum of 50 Russian sailors and specialist technicians there."¹⁹ Additionally, Tartus did not have a command-and-control facility to direct naval operations from the base.²⁰ However, Russia struck a deal in 2017 to extend the lease on the base and planned to invest over 500 million dollars on its facilities, while also stationing Bastion and Bal coastal defense missiles and S-400 missile defense systems there. Essentially, in recent years, the area around Syria has been transformed into a second A2/AD area on NATO's eastern flank, a region it considers highly valuable and vulnerable. Additionally, while these isolated Russian forces in the Mediterranean would eventually lose to a NATO force that is both qualitatively and quantitatively superior, they still have the potential to exact a heavy toll.²¹

A Russian naval force in the Mediterranean is of particular concern to NATO planners, as it also threatens supply lines and trade in a vital region. Clearly, when put to the test by World War Two, the value of the Mediterranean did not prove to be as existentially critical

¹⁷ Gustav Gressel, 'Waves of Ambition: Russia's military build-up in Crimea and the Black Sea'

¹⁸ James Kraska, 'Can Turkey Legally Close Its Straits to Russian Warships? It's Complicated'

¹⁹ Frank Gardner, 'How vital is Syria's Tartus port to Russia?'

²⁰ Christopher Harmer, 'Russian Naval Base Tartus'

²¹ Gorenburg, "Russia's Naval Capabilities in the Mediterranean".

The Russian Mediterranean squadron also has the capability to harass NATO military supply lines in the region - specifically the port of Alexandroupolis, which is now the main port of entry into the Balkans.

as had previously been thought. In the years after the war, American intelligence took the wartime resilience of British shipping to the East, despite the closure of the western Mediterranean, as proof that the importance of Suez had been overstated. However, it is still an important avenue for trade, as proved by the recent obstruction of Suez by the *Ever Given*, which brought an estimated 9.6 billion dollars' worth of trade to a halt every day. The predictions of American intelligence were accurate in this respect: "Although claims that the Mediterranean lifeline is an essential avenue of trade have been exaggerated, unquestionably maintenance of the Suez route is economically and militarily advantageous".²²

It should be noted here that the Russian Mediterranean squadron also has the capability to harass NATO military supply lines in the region – specifically the port of Alexandroupolis, which is now the main port of entry into the Balkans and the Black Sea states –, necessitating a strong NATO presence in the region.

Finally, Russian warships in the Mediterranean are also capable of disrupting European energy needs at a time when the continent is looking to secure alternatives to Russian gas and oil. As far back as 1946, American analysts believed that "The British lifeline must be examined, not as an avenue between Britain and the British possessions east of Suez, but as an avenue from each to the strategically vital Middle East" and the oilfields that sustained the British Empire.²³ In a way this is also true today as more than one million barrels of oil pass through the Suez Canal every day. However, natural gas may even have supplanted oil as the Mediterranean's most important energy asset. No less than 8% of the world's LNG already passes through the Suez Canal daily, while the region is also developing its own natural gas production capacity, primarily in Egypt and Israel. Additionally, there are several extant gas networks in the region (primarily the Trans Adriatic Pipeline), and Greece is developing LNG terminals at Revythousa and Alexandroupolis which are set to supply the Balkans with gas. There are also several realistic energy projects, including the EuroAfrica Interconnector, which will link the Egyptian, Greek, and Cypriot power grids, along with others that seem more unlikely but may yet come to fruition – namely, the EastMed pipeline.

Instead, the Russian Federation and its predecessors have always translated Anglo-American fears of vulnerability in the Mediterranean into tangible benefits closer to home.

Conclusion

Whether Russia or the Soviet Union were ever truly driven by an eternal pursuit of warmwater ports, or if these were actually Anglo-American projections of their own insecurities and naval focus²⁴, is irrelevant, even though the theorem is still widely accepted. Undoubtedly, there is also a certain level of prestige that can be accrued from the projection of power in the region, but neither of these factors can adequately explain the increased concentration of Russian firepower in the Mediterranean.

Instead, the Russian Federation and its predecessors have always translated Anglo-American fears of vulnerability in the Mediterranean into tangible benefits closer to home. Clearly, the Russian Federation is aware that it can achieve disproportionate ship-for-ship results in the region. At the end of World War Two, the Soviet Union was able to leverage the threat of Mediterranean expansion to achieve near-total control of continental Eastern Europe. Similarly, today, the Russian navy is using the threat of a hostile force in

²² SMOF Intelligence Review Box 18, Truman Presidential Library, Independence Missouri.

²³ SMOF Intelligence Reviews Box 18, Truman Library.

²⁴ William C. Green, 'The Historic Russian Drive for Warm Water Port: Anatomy of a Geopolitical Myth', *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 46 (Spring 1993), pp. 80-81.

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the Eastern Mediterranean, which can both outflank any military push northwards and harry supply lines through the area, to ensure that it remains the unchallenged naval power in the Black Sea.

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