

Expanding horizons: Moscow's Mediterranean squadron flexes its muscles

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The Russian Federation Navy now has a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea thanks to Moscow's desire to bolster the Syrian government. *Tim Ripley* examines the emergence of Russian naval power in this strategic region

In 2011, then Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev summoned several mid-ranking military officers to his country residence outside of Moscow to try to find out for himself the “ground truth” regarding the state of the country's troubled armed forces.

According to a report of the meeting leaked to the Moscow media, officers from all branches of the military were handpicked by their service chiefs to make a good case to the Russian president for enhanced defence spending. When Medvedev asked the naval officers present what was needed to bolster Russia's maritime power, top of their list was the re-establishment of a network of foreign bases to enable warships to be sustained on operations around the world.



A still from a video released by the Russian MoD on 19 August 2016 shows a Kalibr cruise missile being launched from a Buyan-M corvette. The MoD said two Buyan-Ms fired three Kalibr missiles at targets in Syria on that day. (TASS/via Getty Images)

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Medvedev indicated that this would be not be easy, saying, “As you know, bases on the territory of foreign states aren’t created on the order of the President of the Russian Federation. For this, it’s necessary to conduct complex political-diplomatic work... I won’t hide from you that we have some ideas on this issue, but I won’t say them out loud for understandable reasons.”

From his comments, it was clear that Moscow’s political and military elite were keen to expand the horizons of Russian naval power, but it would be two years before these ambitions were realised. Syria’s civil war provided the opportunity for Russia to make its move.

The Soviet Navy famously maintained a significant naval presence in the Mediterranean for much of the Cold War. Many observers see the recent deployment of Russian warships to the Mediterranean region as a re-boot of the old Soviet presence. However, Russia’s new naval foray into the Mediterranean is very different in nature and takes places in a very different geo-strategic context.

Cold War legacy

The first Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean involved the dispatch of a contingent of diesel submarines to Albania in 1958, but the high command in Moscow showed little interest in establishing bigger bases for surface ships in the region. This changed dramatically in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War when the Soviet Union realised it would need to send warships to demonstrate support for its allies in the Middle East.

The next six years were the high-water mark of Soviet presence in the Mediterranean, with air and naval bases being established in Egypt, Libya, and Syria. When Egypt opened peace talks with Israel in 1978 the centre of gravity of Soviet naval activity switched to Syria, and Moscow began building up the port of Tartus as the headquarters for its 5th Mediterranean Squadron of Warships, or Fifth Eskadra. A treaty was signed with Damascus to guarantee Soviet access in return for arms supplies to help the Syrians in their conflict with Israel.

Ships and submarines from the Black Sea and Northern fleets rotated through duty during the Cold War to monitor NATO naval activity. The main focus was to have units in hand to neutralise US carrier battle groups and Polaris ballistic missile-firing submarines should the Cold War ever turn ‘hot’.

This naval stand-off continued in a predictable pattern until 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down. When the Soviet Union was dissolved two years later it was decided to abandon the naval base in Tartus: the new Russian Federation had no money nor wiling for foreign military adventures. The last personnel eventually left in December 1992.

Syrian civil war

The descent of Syria into civil war in 2011 led Moscow to consider returning to Tartus. As outside powers decided to back rival sides in the conflict, the Russian government became increasingly determined that its president, Bashar al-Assad, would not be driven from power by Western-backed rebels.

Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict was small scale at first, with the delivery of limited quantities of weapons and equipment starting in 2013. Later that year, the Russian Navy returned to Tartus to re-open facilities to receive cargo-carrying ships dispatched from Black Sea ports.

In mid-2015 Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, stepped up military involvement in the Syrian conflict. This saw the Russian Navy take on a key role to enable and protect the deployment of the Russian Air Group to Syria, as well as its ground protection force of 1,000 army soldiers and naval infantry.

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