

Russia's naval resurgence in Eurasia?

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ABSTRACT

Russia is a leading actor seeking regional influence in Eurasia. Among many aspects of its re-emerging profile, the Russian navy's pre-eminence in the region is noteworthy. Immediately after the disintegration of the USSR, a lack of funding dealt a blow to the Russian navy. However, with the aim of restoring Russian naval power, President Putin began to modernise the Russian navy. Therefore, after setting the backdrop and the strategic outlook of Russia, the study first examines the drivers behind Russia's quest for resurgence and goes on to analyse the trends and intentions of the Russian navy, especially in the four seas of Eurasia – namely the Black Sea, Baltic Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Caspian Sea. The paper also attempts to compare the Russian navy's strength with that of the erstwhile Soviet navy. The study concludes that in order to attain the erstwhile Soviet Union's naval power, Russia would need to overcome a major economic crisis as well as geopolitical challenges.

KEYWORDS

Eurasia; Russian Navy; NATO; sphere of influence; realism

Introduction

“Any ruler that has but ground troops has one hand, but one that has also a navy has both hands”.

—Peter I, “the Great”¹

Eurasia is a dynamic geopolitical region and Russia is a leading aspirant seeking regional pre-eminence and influence. Among the main objectives of Russia's foreign policy is to regain its regional eminence. Russia's influence can be observed in Post-Soviet states, the Middle East, Central Asia and its strategic “rebalance” towards Eurasia is noteworthy. This has ignited debates on Russia's geo-political re-emergence in the twenty-first century. Among many facets of the growing Russian profile is the increasing potency and potential of its navy, and its enhanced presence in the Pacific, Arctic and Atlantic as well as in the Indian Ocean.

In the above context, this paper geographically limits the analysis to the four seas of Eurasia – the Black Sea, Baltic Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Caspian Sea and focuses at the interplay between European Russia, European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It examines the drivers and trends relating to the surge of Russia's naval power in the region in the context of its historical past and the present-day intentions of its apex leadership. It also attempts to understand whether Russia's naval power is resurging to the levels of the erstwhile Soviet Navy.

Backdrop

Eurasia is a civilisational zone, the limits of which are inconsistent with a more or less clearly demarcated geographical region.² The theoretical underpinning of Eurasia dates back to 1904, and was highlighted in the seminal work of English geographer Halford Mackinder, in his article “The Geographical Pivot of History”, submitted in 1904 to the Royal Geographical Society.

Mackinder argued that the Eurasian continent is in the centre of the world, with “Heartland” (the area ruled by the Russian Empire) at the central position in Eurasia. Mackinder proposed that any actor that controls the “Heartland” would have the potential to influence the “World Island”, and would eventually rule the whole world.³ Today, the Heartland includes Russia, the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia, and the Caspian Sea basin.⁴

Present-day Russia has its roots in the expansive Russian Empire – one of the largest empires in world history. It covered vast areas from the Black Sea in the West to the Bering Sea in the East of the Asian continent. In 1721, Peter the Great laid the foundation of the Russian empire. Since then, the Russian empire considered itself a “great power”. It is said that Russia’s heartland location gives it geopolitical advantage and is the core factor contributing to the “greatness” of Russia.

Russia has faced many internal changes and challenges. In 1917, the Tsarist regime was replaced by a socialist government.⁵ Russia had no ambition to be a global power until the Bolshevik Revolution; however, it always wanted to influence Eurasia.⁶ With the end of World War II, the US and the USSR brought back geopolitical competition. At the beginning of the Cold War, Russia took steps to return to its “great power” status.⁷

During the Cold War, Europe’s division became concrete with the division of Germany in 1949 and the emergence of NATO to address security challenges. The Soviet Union and its allies signed a security agreement named the Warsaw Pact in 1955. Eventually, due to internal economic weaknesses and political crises, the USSR disintegrated in 1991, and the world became unipolar with US as the sole superpower. President Putin and many other Russian ethnics consider the dissolution of the Soviet Union a “tragedy”.⁸

Russia’s strategic outlook

Putin’s objective has been to restore the status of “great power” and its honour to Russia, as well as the integration of the post-Soviet space.⁹ Even today, Russian foreign policy is driven by the concept of “great power”.¹⁰ According to an analyst, Russia has five important foreign policy objectives that are reflected in its actions: (1) to maintain security; (2) to push back external influences and alleged meddling in its internal affairs; (3) to proclaim Russia’s right to act as sovereign Great Power; (4) to prevent further intrusions into its sphere of influence; and (5) to reaffirm itself as a global power.¹¹ According to yet another analyst, Russia has four “realist” foreign policy models: multi-polarity, great power management, the balance of power, and spheres of influence.¹²

Russia released its National Security Strategy at the end of 2015, indicating defiance and pushbacks, and establishing priorities until 2020.¹³ According to the strategy, the “Colour Revolution” and corruption are damaging the country’s traditional values. The document warns against the threat of biological and chemical weapons, and refers to NATO’s

expansion towards Russian borders. On the Ukrainian crisis, the document warns against intentional armed conflict instigated by the West. Thus, the strategy clearly indicates Russia's intentions of asserting its power and pursuing its national interest especially in its area of influence.¹⁴

It is fair to argue that Russia is a realist actor, with realism implicitly integrated into its political thoughts. Its foreign policy focuses on sovereignty, state centrism, national interests, hard security, self-sufficiency, self-assertiveness and sphere of influence.¹⁵ It ensures security through strategic depth, and focuses on sovereignty, nationalism and traditional geopolitics.¹⁶

The drivers

The drivers behind Russia's quest for resurgence have been broadly divided into three categories: psychological, economic, and security.

Psychological factors

The disintegration of the USSR led to regime changes of several Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, and paved the way for their integration into the European Union. Some of the post-Soviet countries united to form a loose Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).¹⁷

After the disintegration of the USSR, since Russians were the largest population while Russia was the largest country of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited both the Soviet military and the Communist party and came to be widely accepted as the Soviet Union's successor state in diplomatic affairs. In the aftermath of the disintegration, Russia went through both political and economic crises. Its new interests and boundaries were unclear in the initial phase of its formation. Under President Boris Yeltsin, national interests and domestic politics played a greater role while international objectives took a back seat. President Yeltsin opted for low-key foreign policy objectives.

The fall of the USSR inflicted a sense of humiliation among the people of Russia. The disintegration of the superpower, the failure of the communist system, and the identity crisis gave a serious jolt. The losses, as well as the inability to win over the first Chechen war (1994–1996), were another humiliation.¹⁸

Economic factors

The declining economic output and increasing inflation dealt a blow to the country. Russia suffered high inflation rate and lost about 30% of its real gross domestic product (GDP). The quality of life of the Russian citizen also fell, with 29% of the population living below the poverty line in 2000.¹⁹

In 1999, Vladimir Putin – the prime minister under President Yeltsin's tenure – became acting president, and eventually the elected president of Russia in the year 2000. Under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, Russia gradually began recovering from economic depression. The immediate reason for this recovery was the booming oil and gas prices in the year 1997–1998, which helped Russia to build up its currency.²⁰ With the growing economy, Russian military forces were also allocated better funds, and Russia re-

established its influence beyond its territory. The quality of life of the people improved, and the number of people living below the poverty line dropped to 13% in 2007. The Russian economy experienced a boom from 1999 to 2008 and the real GDP increased at an average rate of 6.9% during this period.²¹

However, in 2008, the Russian economy plummeted due to falling oil prices, leading to devaluation of the Russian rouble. Even though it recovered from the decline by 2012, due to structural weakness and low investments, the Russian economy began to decline further.²² Recently, after the Crimean crisis, the West imposed economic sanctions on Russia, including an asset freeze and travel bans. In addition, the falling oil price has aggravated the economic challenges for Russia.

Security factor

After the end of the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact was dissolved, while NATO survived. Most of the post-Soviet countries who joined the EU also joined NATO. This eastward movement was considered by Russia as an encroachment on its “area of influence” and perceived by the latter as a major security threat, which is explicitly stated in its recently released National Security Strategy.²³ However, against NATO’s expansion, there have been many arguments; one being that, during the German unification in 1990, the US had promised Russia that the NATO would not expand eastward following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany. Russia asserts that the US did not keep its promise and, in fact, now 12 Eastern European countries have joined NATO.²⁴ Apart from that, the prospect of Georgia and Ukraine joining the treaty organisation has been a major cause of concern for Russia.

In 2016, the US deployed its Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system in Romania and NATO is setting up the second BMD system in Poland, which shares a border with Kaliningrad, a Russian administrative division. Russia views the US’ defence system in Romania as a threat to its national security.²⁵ Moscow asserts that the advanced US missile system, which is expected to be completed by 2020, could decapitate the Russian strategic missile system pre-emptively. The missile system’s mobile components – the interceptor missiles installed on warships – are considered major threats to Russia. Russia also claims that the US’ anti-missile launching platforms can be used to launch cruise missiles against Russia, which would be an infringement of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.²⁶

In response to the increased activity of the Russian Navy in the Baltic Sea, Sweden and Finland have rushed to NATO for enhanced military cooperation. Russia views this cooperation as a security threat.²⁷

Along with the above-mentioned imperatives, Russia’s geographical constraints have also played an important role in its quest for resurgence. Other than the Arctic Ocean, which is frozen for several months of the year, Russia is a landlocked country in terms of its direct access to the oceans. Besides this natural constraint, the man-made borders have further boxed in Russia. After Soviet disintegration, the map of Eurasia changed dramatically. Russian borders shrunk and it lost territorial control over the post-Soviet space. In 2004, 10 countries joined the EU, which erased the division between Eastern and Western Europe. Since then, the borders of the EU have increased and the EU has come closer to Russia’s area of influence.

The humiliating demise of the communist bloc, economic adversities, and the insecurity posed by NATO, together with geographical constraints, have emerged as the drivers behind Russia's strategic "pushback" against Eurasia's western periphery.

Russian naval power: trends and intention in four seas

Within the Eurasian periphery, there are four seas of Eurasia – the Black Sea, Baltic Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Caspian Sea. It is instructive to analyse how the above-mentioned drivers are manifested in its naval ambitions in these four seas.

The Black Sea

It is argued that whoever controls the Black Sea would be able to influence the Balkans, Central Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean, the South Caucasus and the northern Middle East.²⁸ It is the primary source of access to the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean.²⁹ It is a platform for Russia to exemplify and project its great power status. Thus, it is important for Russia to guard its interest in the Black Sea.

The objective of the Black Sea Fleet is to protect the southern flank of Russia, and to contain NATO's presence and influence in the region. The Black Sea Fleet was deployed by Russia in the Georgia–Russia War (2008) and shelled Georgian ports, and destroyed eight ships in the ports of Poti.³⁰ However, learning from the experiences of the Russia–Georgia War in 2008, Russia ordered two Mistral-Class amphibious assault ships from France in 2010.³¹ Since 2008, Russia has reinstated its presence in the eastern littorals of the Black Sea.

Russian interests in the Black Sea include energy claims in the North West Black Sea Region and the control of pipelines that pass through the region, which may disrupt the link between the Caspian Basin and Europe for energy. It may further jeopardise the West's linkages to Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan for natural gas. Russia also wants influence over the future of Ukrainian foreign policy through its Black Sea dominance.³²

One of the most important Russian interests in the region is Sevastopol, the only warm water port of Russia in Black Sea, located on the Crimean Peninsula, and is strategically vital to Russia. In 1997, a treaty between Russia and Ukraine allowed Russia to retain its Black Sea Fleets, and to lease the base at Sevastopol for 20 years. After the expiry of the lease, Russia had to move most of its naval troops and flotilla to the Black Sea's eastern coast. This would have decreased its influence on Ukraine and thus Black Sea region. Hence, to secure its interests, Russia made a deal (Kharkiv Pact) with the pro-Russian government in Ukraine on April 21, 2010, in which they agreed to extend the deal by 25 years. The deal has the provision to be extended by five more years. In exchange for this, Russia had to supply natural gas to Ukraine at a 30% reduced price. However, Russia failed to win a deal or remove restrictions on the size of the Black Sea Fleet, as it could just replace the old ships with new ones.³³ Overall, the deal turned out to be highly controversial, as this would allow Russia to "continue having heavy naval firepower, attack aircraft, and a larger maritime landing force garrisoned in Ukraine until 2047".³⁴ Nevertheless, there was a turnaround of events that changed the future of the Black Sea Fleet. On February 27, 2014, Russian

task force began an operation to seize Crimea. On March 17, the Crimean Parliament declared its independence from Ukraine, and on March 18, it signed a treaty of accession to the Russian Federation.³⁵

The Russian Presidency considers it the “reclamation” of its “historic territory” and a correction of the “historic mistake” committed by the Soviet Union sixty years ago. However, the West – including the US and Europe – and Ukraine did not recognise this claim; instead they have imposed sanctions on Russia and denounced the act.³⁶ Nevertheless, the sanctions and the diplomatic isolation have failed to threaten Russia. According to Western analysts, Russia’s ultimate aim behind the annexation is to stop Ukraine from being inclined towards the West and to reinstate Russia’s hegemony in the region through the Black Sea.³⁷

Apart from Crimea’s annexation, Russia also increased an allocation of US \$2.3 billion in developmental funding for the Black Sea Fleet and the acquisition of 80 new warships in the region by 2020. Implementation of this plan has begun and in 2016, for the first time since the end of Cold War, a new class of Russian guided missile frigate has deployed to Sevastopol.³⁸ Moreover, the Russian Navy is to open a new submarine base on the Black Sea coast in Novorossiysk to counter the NATO threat.³⁹

The Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea has facilitated Russia in reaching the world’s ocean to projecting power.⁴⁰ During the twentieth century, despite the Soviet aim to influence the Baltic Sea, NATO had stronger control over the region because of its hold on the Danish Straits.⁴¹ The disintegration of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact led to a squeeze on Russia, and it had to restrict itself to the easternmost end of the Gulf of Finland. However, the presence of the Russian exclave Kaliningrad in the Baltic region has ensured Russia’s active involvement in the region.

After the 2004 expansion, the EU borders came closer to Russia. Kaliningrad, a small oblast situated between Poland and Lithuania, is separated from the rest of mainland Russia although politically it is under Russia. Kaliningrad serves as the most direct access to warm water of the Baltic Sea. Thus, it is of strategic value to Russia.⁴²

Russia feared the possible deployment of the alliance forces in the Baltic region after the enlargement.⁴³ One of the major aims of the Baltic Sea Fleet is to protect Russia’s political status and sovereignty.⁴⁴ The tension was aggravated when it was announced that NATO could use the military infrastructure left behind by the Soviet–Russian army in 1993 and 1994.

Today, Russia fears the possible NATO expansion to Finland and Sweden. In addition, the following Syrian airstrikes by Russia through the Caspian Sea have led to rising tensions between the West and Russia. In response, the UK has decided to station troops in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. This has become another cause of tension for Russia.⁴⁵

Recently, Sweden and Denmark claimed that a Russian military signal intelligence aircraft had collided with a commercial jet liner over the Baltic Sea region. However, Russia rejected the claims. According to the US Navy, Russia is building up its powerful submarine force and its new anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strongholds in Kaliningrad enclave in the Baltic Sea.⁴⁶

The Mediterranean Sea

During the Cold War, the Mediterranean was one of the most important geostrategic areas for the US and Soviet naval forces. Competition for fetching allies and the containment of others from influencing the region was their major objective.⁴⁷

After the 1991 Soviet disintegration, the US firmed its hold in the Mediterranean during the Gulf War, followed by the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. However, Russia under President Putin has emerged as an important player in this region.

Russia aims to fill the void in the Mediterranean created by the US pivot to Asia-Pacific. Moreover, Russia's access to the Mediterranean is controlled by some of the NATO members and their allies. Thus, Russia needs access to the ports from Eastern Mediterranean to the Strait of Gibraltar for logistic purposes.⁴⁸

Tartus, a port city in Syria, has served as the only Russian naval base in the Mediterranean. Syria, one of the important littorals, has been witnessing civil war since 2011. It started as a people's revolt against the regime of President Assad, but soon the uprising has also turned into a humanitarian crisis. Despite the international pressure (excluding Russia, China and Iran), the president of Syria is not ready to step down or end the violent repression of his own people. It is argued that Russia has had long-standing political, economic and strategic relations with Syria and, therefore, its support for the regime did not come as a surprise.

In the energy sector, the Syrian government has signed an agreement with Russia to explore oil and gas in the Mediterranean territorial waters of Syria.⁴⁹ Since 2011, Spain has agreed to refuel Russian naval vessels at the Spanish island of Ceuta near Morocco.⁵⁰

In 2015, Russia made a deal with Cyprus, which hosts two British bases, to service logistical support to Russian ships for counterterrorism and anti-piracy operation.⁵¹ Besides this deal, in 2014, the Russian warship *Vice Admiral Kulakov* visited Malta; and in 2015, a Russian Navy landing ship visited Greece.⁵² The Chinese and Russian navies have conducted live-fire drills and escort operations – codenamed “Joint Sea 2015” – in the eastern Mediterranean. This was the first time that the two cooperated in the region.⁵³ Thus, Russia is making all efforts to make its own ring of friends.

The escalating crisis in Syria – especially after Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24M bomber jet allegedly intruding into Turkish airspace – the Eastern Mediterranean is increasingly becoming “a hot spot”. Warships from more than 10 countries are deployed off the Syrian coast.⁵⁴ The Syrian crisis has forced Russia to increase its military personnel exponentially at Tartus, a small naval repair base where only a limited number of specialists used to be deployed. These deployments have intensified the tension between Russia and the West.⁵⁵

The rise of the Islamic State of Levant and Iraq (ISIL), one of the military organisations against the Assad regime in the Syrian crisis, has become a major security issue. On October 7, Russia launched a Caspian Flotilla frigate against ISIL (discussed later) which has further escalated tension between Russia and the West. The Russian naval presence off the Eastern Mediterranean is to pacify the situation in Syria; however, the confrontation of differing political interests in the region may lead to adverse effects.⁵⁶

The Caspian Sea

The Caspian Sea is the world's largest inland water body,⁵⁷ located at the heart of the Eurasian landmass.⁵⁸ It has been argued that although the USSR has disintegrated and post-Soviet Russia has failed to achieve “superpower” status, Russia has always made endeavours to reinstate its “hegemony” in the region, as it did in Soviet times.⁵⁹ It has 10% of world gas and oil reserves; however, its geographical position restricts it from direct access to the world market. “In this region, there is an intricate relationship between the interests of the producer, consumer and transit countries”.⁶⁰

One of the other reasons for making this region geopolitically important is that its energy reserves may help Europe to escape from dependence on Russia for its oil and gas supplies.⁶¹ Overall, Russia intends to strengthen its position in the region as it has realised the potential of the Caspian Sea Region of becoming a bridge among the Middle East, post-Soviet republics and Europe.⁶² Apart from the above-mentioned reasons, the presence of the Western powers in the region is again a source of tension for the Kremlin.⁶³

In 2015, a Russian Caspian Sea Flotilla comprising one frigate and three destroyers launched 26 Kalibr 3M-14 T cruise missiles at 11 targets in Syria. These flew over Iran and Iraq before hitting targets in Syria. The West condemned the action and considered it a security threat. The launch made it clear that the Russian Navy also has the capability of long-range cruise missile operations.⁶⁴ Today, Russia's Caspian Flotilla has 27 warships and more than 10 support vessels.⁶⁵

Moreover, Russia's display of military power has affected the civil aviation routes over the Caspian Sea. According to international air safety agencies, the missile trajectories cut across a busy airway route between Europe, the Gulf and Asia, thus leading to airline alerts across the region.⁶⁶ In addition, it has also sought to deepen its relation with former Soviet countries of the region by convincing them to bar foreign militaries from the Caspian Sea through the Convention on Independence of the Caspian Sea. However, a number of issues remained unresolved.⁶⁷

Russian naval power: overall trends

Historically, Peter the Great is believed to be the creator of the Russian Navy in 1696 during the Russo–Turkish war of 1686–1700. Throughout its history, the Navy has attempted to reach out to the open oceans, against the severe challenges posed by Russia's geography. As mentioned earlier, it is nearly landlocked, as most of its northern coasts are frozen around the year. It always has a need for warm-water ports to support its trade throughout the year.⁶⁸ Its access to the oceans and seas is restricted by surrounding Europe, China, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Hence, while Russia's geographic location makes it a continental power, it has always endeavoured to become a sea power.⁶⁹

It was during the Cold War that the Soviet Union's vision of sea power came into the limelight. During the Cold War, the Soviet Navy built the world's second largest ocean fleet under the command of Admiral Sergey Gorshkov. Gorshkov rehabilitated US Admiral A.T. Mahan's concept of sea-power – that links economic power to naval power – but adapted it to the communist ideology.⁷⁰ For him, a strong navy was essential for building a prosperous nation. During the 1970s, Gorshkov expressed similar thoughts

on sea power in his book titled *The Sea Power of the State*, in which he emphasised that “sea power is the capacity of a particular country to use the military-economic possibilities of the ocean for its own purposes”.⁷¹ He propounded that naval power is a prerequisite for great powers, and believed that the Soviet Navy must fulfil this requirement in peacetime in order to propagate its communist agenda.

During the Cold War, ocean fleets with nuclear submarines were essential prerequisites for being a superpower.⁷² In the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet Navy went through significant modernisation.⁷³

While the USSR disintegrated, the lack of finances and the division of naval assets among the post-Soviet countries dealt a major blow to the Navy, which came to be regarded as a weak fleet of decaying ships.⁷⁴ Because of a lack of funding, the manning strength of the Russian Navy declined by 50% during the first half of the 1990s. Between 1992 and 1997, the financial allocation towards the ex-Soviet military systems fell to a mere 5%.⁷⁵ However, under President Vladimir Putin, Russia continued to pursue Gorshkov’s “Ocean Strategy”, as reflected in its maritime doctrine of 2001.⁷⁶ With the aim of restoring Russian naval power, President Putin began to modernise the Russian Navy, inducting advanced submarines and warships.⁷⁷

There are several different estimations of defence spending from a variety of sources. According to the Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2015, Russia increased its defence budget by 7.5%, amounting to the total defence outlay being the 4.5% of the GDP, the highest proportion after Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁷⁸

Today, the Russian naval inventory includes 209 warships, 72 submarines, an aircraft carrier cruiser, several heavy-nuclear guided missile cruisers and a number of guided missile cruisers, large anti-submarine warfare (ASW) ships and nuclear-powered guided missile submarines.⁷⁹ The Russian Navy is re-arming and is once again receiving higher funding.⁸⁰ In 2015, Russia launched Varshavyanka-class diesel-electric submarines, which it believed to be the “quietest submarine in the world”.⁸¹ It is also providing advanced weapons to other countries. Lately, the Russian Kilo-class submarines have been sold to Algeria and Vietnam, whereas a modified Kiev-class aircraft carrier has been given to India. Vietnam has received the Russian Gepard-class frigates. In addition, during the last 10 years, Russia has been producing high-performance Klub (Club) missiles as well.⁸²

Naval resurgence or facade?

Russia had aimed to expand its naval presence⁸³ and has always considered the expansion of its territory a natural process.⁸⁴ What follows is an analysis of the Russian vision and actions, which indicate Russia’s intent and challenges for resurgence.

Naval strength

While analysing its naval strength, it is estimated that over the next 20 years, the Russian Navy would transform into a new and modern navy. The new submarines and ships will integrate modern technology such as weapons; sensors; command, control and communication capabilities; signature reduction, etc.⁸⁵ Keeping up its high naval ambitions, the

Russian Navy also announced that it would be conducting more than 40 tactical exercises with other navies, including the Egyptian navy and Indian Navy, by the end of 2016.⁸⁶

As mentioned earlier, Russia increased its defence spending in 2015; however, Russia exhausted more than half of its defence budget in the first half of the year. Thus, Russia's heavy defence budget is burdening its Reserve Funds.⁸⁷ It is also argued that Russia's heavy investment in defence is parallel to its predecessor's military build-up that consequently weakened the economy of the country and finally led to disintegration.⁸⁸ In 2016 Russia announced a cut of its defence budget because of falling oil prices, international sanctions and the devaluation of the Russian rouble, which would affect its naval ambitions.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) World Economic Outlook October 2015 forecast, Russia's GDP is expected to make a comeback only by 2017 onwards.⁹⁰

In comparison to the Soviet Navy, it is argued that the Russian navy is less than half of the strength of its predecessor. According to an analyst, in 2015, Russia's total naval fleet size, including submarines and surface ships, numbered 172 ships total. In comparison, the Soviet navy measured 657 ships in 1990.⁹¹ In addition, Russia's current large vessels are Soviet remnants which are largely defunct and in need of renovations. Further, the economic situation and challenges of the country would be a major hurdle for its aim to reach the erstwhile Soviet Navy's might.⁹²

Implications for NATO

Even though Russia's naval capability has not reached to the Soviet might, its intentions and activities in the NATO-dominated regions have made Russia an existential threat to NATO. Recently, the US Commander of Naval Forces has showed concern over unprecedented growing submarine activities by Russia since the Cold War, and considers it "some of the most dangerous threats"⁹³ for the US navy.⁹⁴ The Russian submarine deployment in the Baltic region is considered a step towards curtailment of Western influence in the region. NATO's chief commander Philip Breedlove has called Russia as an "existential threat" to the US and its allies. He has expressed doubts about Russia's nuclear stability as the recently released Military Doctrine gives a clear guideline on the use of nuclear weapons. Moreover, its military deployment in Syria is considered as a clear threat to the West.⁹⁵ These trends are indicating towards a new friction between Russia and West alike the Cold War period.

Alliances in the making

Since the disintegration of the USSR and dissolution of the Warsaw pact, Russia is looking for allies. Amidst sanctions and international isolation, Russia is trying to make its own circle of friends to secure eminence in Eurasia.

Russia's relations with China should be seen in the light of Western sanctions and strained relations with the US and Europe over Ukraine. This reflects the realist move, which is, no doubt, "merely a marriage or axis of convenience, which will only last as long as it does not damage its two players".⁹⁶ The recent Chinese and Russian navies' live-fire drills and escort operations in the eastern Mediterranean are a case in point.

To ensure naval presence in the Mediterranean, Russia has been a constant support for President Assad in the Syrian crisis. Moreover, Russia has accorded a deal with the EU and NATO member states, such as Spain and Cyprus that allows Russian ships to access their ports.⁹⁷ Thus, Russia is gaining a strong foothold in Europe itself. Recently, in the light of changed Turkish foreign policy, Russia and Turkey have also come close and are cooperating on the issue of Syria.⁹⁸

There have been a number of initiatives to re-integrate post-Soviet countries, including the CIS.⁹⁹ Among them, the Eurasian Union – an economic union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia – is one of the most recent. It was formed to improve trade relations and for better cohesion among Eurasian countries.¹⁰⁰ Russia aims to curb Western influence in the region through this union. However, the economic weakness, political disunity, and unclear goals among the member states have slowed down progress.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

Russia considers naval power to revive its status as a superpower. The Russian Navy, after a downfall in the post-Soviet decade, has slowly recovered; and its modernisation under the leadership of President Putin has renewed Russia's aspirations of exerting global influence.

Russia has shown strong naval activities over the last few years. Trends such as the annexation of Crimea, restoring control over the port city of Sevastopol, the launch of the Maritime Doctrine 2020 (which reaffirms Russia's commitment to regain its blue-water navy), and increasing the size of fleets in the Black Sea and Baltic Sea exemplify Russia's intentions to resurge. NATO itself has named Russia one of its existential threats, which shows Russia's potential. Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis and its policy to fight ISIL through the Caspian Sea has potentially jeopardised the security equations of the West, which can potentially cause new frictions between Russia and the West.

Under President Putin, Russia has successfully reinstated its capacity to uphold its presence in the area of its core interests. However, it is true that today, Russia is not as strong as the Soviet Union was; but under Putin, it has enhanced its power manifold since the demise of the Soviet Union. It is fair to conclude that there are intents and trends to prove Russia's naval resurgence; however, in order to attain the erstwhile Soviet naval power, Russia would need to overcome major economic and geopolitical challenges.

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