

## THE BLACK SEA: A GEOPOLITICAL SPACE OF RUSSIAN THALASSOCRATIC AMBITIONS

*Adrian Ionuț BOGDAN\**

**Abstract.** *Rarely has a maritime space played such an important role in geopolitics and the regional and international balance of power. The last twenty years have brought dramatic changes to the international system and demonstrated that the end of history predicted by Fukuyama in the 1990s has not come true. Although separated by almost 8000 km, the Seas around China and the Black Sea have reached a symmetrical position in the new confrontation between the Euro-Atlantic allies and the new Sino-Russian axis. Just as the seas in the east and south of China represent a front in the struggle to change the international system between Communist China and the US together with its Asian allies (Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea), so the Black Sea has become a geopolitical space of confrontation between Russia on one side and Europe and the US on the other. The research "The Black Sea: A Geopolitical Space of Russian Thalassocratic Ambitions" wants to analytically present how Moscow tried to achieve thalassocratic ambitions through its expansionist policy in the case of the Invasion of Georgia in 2008, the Annexation of Crimea in 2014, and with the Attack on Ukraine this year. In the center of these expansionist policies there have always been reasons such as the expansion of the Russian sphere of influence, and the blocking of the Euro-Atlantic enlargement, but to all this was also added, in a complementary way, a historical thalassocratic ambition of the Russian Federation.*

**Key words:** *Coastline control, Georgia, Crimea, Ukraine, The balance of power, The symmetry between the Black Sea and the South and East China Seas*

### **Introduction**

The Black Sea has always been crucial in the geopolitics of Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Middle East. It is a connecting bridge between them, a huge source of oil and gas, and a commercial hub. The history of the geopolitics of this sea is as spectacular as the history of the countries that have access to it. If after 1991, the security of the Black Sea seemed to be a settled matter, the war in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and the invasion of Ukraine would prove otherwise. Today, thanks to the aggressive and expansionist actions of the Russian Federation, the Black Sea is once again a tense geopolitical space, armed and prepared for a conflict of supremacy. Over the course of 14 years, the Black Sea, like the South and East China Seas, became a real battlefield between Western democracies (USA, NATO, EU, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan) and authoritarian regimes (Russia, China, North Korea, Iran), a theater of operations from which large-scale changes can occur and capable of affecting the system of international relations.

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\* Faculty of European Studies (Babeș-Bolyai University), Emmanuel de Martonne Street, nr. 1, Cluj-Napoca 400090, E-mail: adrianionutbogdan@gmail.com

This article consists of four sections, with fundamental aspects of the recent evolution of the regional (in the Black Sea area) and partly global power balance, highlighting the maritime ambitions that Russia had on the occasion of the attack on Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Also, Russia's global condition has concretely shaped the Russian objectives regarding the Black Sea, and these things are dealt with globally in a dedicated section.

### **1. First of all, Georgia, 2008**

After declaring independence in 1991, Georgia tries to establish good relations with the Russian Federation, but tensions arise over some Georgian regions: Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which were strongly supported by Russia in a large separatist movement. Even so, the real problem between the Russian Federation and Georgia was not the two breakaway provinces themselves, but Georgia's refusal at the time to join Russia in the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), Boris Yeltsin's project to create a sphere of Russian influence (economically, politically and military) in the ex-Soviet space. The loss of Georgia from this project could not be allowed, as the Russians did not initially recognize Georgia's independence, *and Boris Yeltsin conditioned this gesture on the reconciliation between the two sides through Georgia's accession to the CIS* (d'Encausse, 2010: 176). Shortly after Georgia declares independence, the two separatist regions will try to become independent as well, but Georgia will prevent this with a dynamic intervention against the rebel forces.

A long period of diplomatic war begins between Moscow and Tbilisi over Russia's support for Ossetia and Abkhazia. In the desire to capture the support of the West, break away from Russia definitively, and possibly be invited within NATO, the leadership of Georgia decides on very bold measures, all because *Saakashvili wants to prove to everyone that he is not afraid of Moscow* (d'Encausse, 2010: 197). In the following period, Georgia strengthens its administration, increases the defense budget considerably, and manages to defeat the last secessionist cells in the territory of Ossetia and Abkhazia supported by Russia, establishing leadership within the two regions. Also, many Russian diplomats in the capital Tbilisi will be accused of espionage and forced to leave the country, but the most unexpected thing was that *Georgia, a member of the WTO (World Trade Organization), is using its veto power to block the negotiations for the preparation of Russia's entry into this world organization* (d'Encausse, 2010: 197) something that hit both Russia's international prestige and the economic interests of the Russian state. All these measures taken by Georgia seem bold at first glance, but they were caused by *a real anti-Russian resentment of the Georgians, which had its origins in the history of relations between the two peoples* (d'Encausse, 2010: 197).

The climax of the Russian-Georgian diplomatic confrontation was when *at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, which took place from 2-4 April 2008, the allies engaged in a heated and dramatic debate over the right to grant Georgia and Ukraine access to the Alliance Accession Action Plan, a program designed to help aspirant countries better prepare for eventual accession* (Asmus, 2010: 111). In his last months in office, George W. Bush would have liked both Georgia and Ukraine to receive this acceding country status, but opposition from Germany and other Western European states blocked this. Without inclusion in the accession plan, *Saakashvili had few illusions about the West coming to Georgia's military assistance if it fights the Russians* (Asmus, 2010: 43), realizing the extremely dangerous situation in which he had engaged the country. The only thing the alliance leaders agreed to do, mostly under pressure from President Bush, was to say: *We agree that Georgia and*

*Ukraine will eventually become NATO members* (d'Encausse, 2010: 201), but this was only a mere political statement without substance.

In August 2008, Ossetian and Abkhaz rebels start new clashes with Georgian law enforcement, and Georgia decides to attack the Ossetian separatist capital of Tskhinvali, but the operation to stop the rebels leads to a large-scale Russian intervention, and initial Georgian victories are followed by an extremely strong Russian counter-offensive in both Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russian convoys of ammunition, armored vehicles, tanks, and military supplies for the offensive in Ossetia and Abkhazia arrive in Georgia through the Roki Tunnel. The war begins on August 7 and ends five days later on August 12 with the tactical defeat of the Georgians, and the Russian government officially recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia a month later. Georgia definitively loses control of the two regions, but with the diplomatic intervention of Nicolas Sarkozy, Tbilisi is no longer conquered, and Georgia remains independent, even with massive territorial losses. The saving initiative for the Georgian state consisted of a *six-point ceasefire plan* (d'Encausse, 2010: 199) made by Sarkozy during the French presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The end of the Russian-Georgian confrontation destroys any chance of Georgia joining NATO, leaves the country without a significant percentage of the population, without almost half of the exit from the Black Sea coast, and leads to a real economic decline, amplifying and more the Georgians' dependence on Russia. From a rational perspective, Russia's actions have brought it far more benefits than costs. Russia not only blocked a possible expansion of the North Atlantic organization but gained geostrategic military bases on the territory of Abkhazia and Ossetia, having the possibility to easily control the future of Georgia and the Caucasus. Although about Georgia we can appreciate a very visible maximization of power, about the expansion of NATO and the American sphere of influence we are discussing a double maximization that Russia is achieving. On the one hand, by preventing the situation of having a NATO state on its southern border, Russia has considerably maximized its security, but at the same time, by taking de facto control of Abkhazia and Ossetia, Russia it also maximized its power vis-à-vis NATO in the South Caucasus region. The occupation of Abkhazia and thereby half of the Georgian coastline increased Russian influence in the Black Sea considerably but also paved the way for an increasingly expansionist foreign policy. The attack on Georgia in 2008 and the occupation of key Georgian territories would outline and prepare Russia's new target: Crimea.

## **2. Fear of the West and Thalassocratic Ambitions: Crimea**

What Russia wanted to achieve from the war in Georgia was not only the conquest of strategically crucial areas for the South Caucasus, this short war was also meant to act as a *signal and warning* (Bogdan, 2021: 393) for Kyiv, but things were not like that, and following large demonstrations, collectively called EuroMaidan, the leadership of Ukraine made the historic decision to orient itself in the direction of a possible European and North Atlantic integration.

For the Russian Federation, the mere prospect of a rapprochement of Ukraine with the West was seen as ungrateful, but a possible Euro-Atlantic integration was considered a direct danger to Moscow. Even before the events of 2014 in Ukraine, the propagandist of territorial expansion policies and theoretician of contemporary Russian geopolitics, Aleksandr Dughin, stated that *the absolute imperative of Russian geopolitics in the Black Sea is Moscow's total and unhindered control over the entire northern shore, from Ukrainian territories up to the Abkhazian ones* (Dughin, 2011: 231). In the opinion of the

Russian propagandist from Moscow, *Ukraine should remain only a cordon sanitaire* (Dughin, 2014: 194) to serve Russia's interests in the Black Sea, but also in the West.

What Dughin stated in his more or less scientific works at the end of the last two decades would materialize with the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the support of pro-Russian rebels in the frozen conflicts in eastern Ukraine, in Donbas. What drove Russia to take such a risky, illegal, yet expansionist action was a real fear of the prospect of a West reaching Russia's western borders.

Geopolitically, Russia benefits from a complex set of advantages that transforms it into a continental power of unprecedented proportions: *to the north protected, but also blocked by the ice of the Arctic Ocean, to the south by the impressive desert cold expanses of Central Asia, in the Caucasus by a mountain range that protects it from the storms of the Middle East* (Kaplan, 2020: 287) but the West remains the weakness due to the vast plain and proportions that will always need a buffer zone, and this buffer can only be provided by the Baltic states, Belarus and Ukraine. Given the rapid integration of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia into Euro-Atlantic structures and Belarus's traditional affinity for Russia, the only card in this geopolitical game remains Ukraine. However, it was not only the survival instinct that shaped the actions that Russia would undertake, but rather a categorically re-emerging desire to put Russia back in the power play of major decisions within international relations, to which, in addition, obviously, the tsarist ambitions of Russian leader Vladimir Putin.

No one could ever say with certainty, before the reference year 2014, that an episode similar to the one of Georgia in 2008 would happen again. The results of the West's underestimation of Russia were seen in this defiance of international law, an abrupt shift from "force of law" to "law of force" that would continue to mark the international system for decades to come. The annexation of Crimea had obvious effects on the evolution of the balance of power at the international level and reopened the way for aggressive international policies, and this only reconfirms the realist's perspective on international relations. The prospect of occupying the Crimean peninsula and other Ukrainian territories was animated by Russia's *fierce desire to reassert* (Weiner, 2020: 9-11), *the necessity to create a buffer zone* (Naumescu, Fati, et al, 2018: 105) between West and East, *exploiting Ukraine's moment of weakness, the rich resources in the eastern area* (Grigas, 2016: 176-177), the special agricultural capabilities due to the very fertile soil, the much more temperate climate, but also the major geopolitical role of the Crimean peninsula at the level of the Black Sea geostrategy and the satisfaction of the thalassocratic ambitions of the Russian continental power.

In February 2014, Russian troops specially trained for the annexation of the peninsula had the mission of capturing the main administrative buildings, in the days that followed, the Russian military presence became stronger and stronger, so that later, against its background, Crimea would illegitimately proclaim its independence and eventually become part of the Russian Federation as a federal subject following a March 2014 referendum contested by the entire world with few exceptions from states allied to Moscow or states not recognized among them (Transnistria, Ossetia, Abkhazia). The shock of this campaign *destroyed any hope of the partnership between Russia and the West, NATO stopped any political and military collaboration with Moscow, and the G8 decided to exclude Russia* (Blake, 2020: 328).

By occupying Crimea and carrying out frozen conflicts on the territory of Ukraine, in the eastern Donbas region, Moscow managed to strengthen its control over the Black Sea, but also to prevent any Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the future presidential administrations

from Kyiv. By annexing Crimea, Russia obtained a geostrategic territory, a base for launching any naval operations off the Black Sea, and an operational command center that allowed the achievement of thalassocratic ambitions that were indispensable for a continental power in its desire to reaffirm and change the balance of power at the international level. Russia also gained a population of approximately 2.4 million inhabitants, of which more than two-thirds were ethnic Russians, but also access to the commercial hub represented by the city and southern port of Sevastopol, which represented an interest in China's project to restore the trade route very well known as the New Silk Road.

The tragic historical context means that only 8 years after these events, in the same fateful month of February, now in 2022, Ukraine will once again be in the sights of Russian expansionist policies, this time with even more aggressive intentions, on an unprecedented scale.

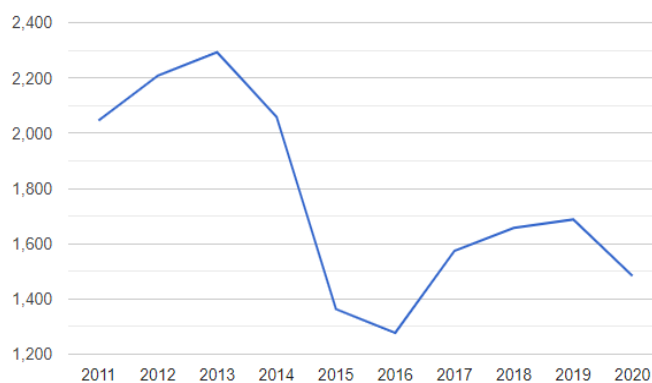
### 1. Russia, 30 Years after the Fall of the Soviet Union

The annexation of Crimea gave Russia a whole new set of assets from the perspective of Eastern European geopolitics, allowed the expansion of Russian maritime space at the expense of Ukraine, *and paved the way for increasingly aggressive policies from Moscow* (Grigas, 2016: 219), in relations with other global actors.

But what Moscow was less aware of following the occupation of Crimea was the *devastating effect* (Rosefielde, 2020: 434) of the combined US and European Union economic sanctions have had on the Russian economy. In the figure on the left we can see a decrease of almost 40% of the GDP from about 2060 billion dollars in 2014 to 1267 billion in 2016. This huge impact on the Russian economy almost instantly cancels the prestige

due to the geopolitical changes achieved, because the downgrade from the eighth position in the global economic ranking to the eleventh represented a major degradation of economic prestige, a devaluation of the ruble, and a loss of investor confidence, an economic suicide in the medium and the long term.

Aware of the economic disaster, President Putin decides to sign an agreement brokered by France and Germany in Minsk almost a year later. Simultaneously, on January 1, 2015, another important event in the recent history of Russia takes place, the Eurasian Economic Union enters into force and is officially created, an economic and political union that brought together states such as Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, a fact which demonstrated the special interest Moscow had in the political and economic destiny of the ex-Soviet space, a quarter of a century after the disappearance of the Soviet Union. The recovery of the Russian economy after the annexation of Crimea has been extremely difficult, without the expected effect, and an extremely slow one.



**Fig.1.** The Russian Economic Evolution between 2011 - 2020  
(TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2022)

The historical evolution and balance of power relations from 2008-2014 once again allowed for increasingly *striking antagonism* (Weiner, 2020: 15) between Russia and the West, restoring the traditional state of rivalry between Russia and the United States, restoring mutual suspicions and waging political war, but more importantly, the escalation of growing tensions between the two blocs.

In the international disorder, which constitutes by its very matter a form of order, Russia has an increasingly unclear role. In this political-economic-military dispute between Washington and Beijing, which we observe every day is becoming more and more pronounced, Moscow has very few options left, among them: *the consolidation of Sino-Russian relations, the formation of the third pole of power, or adopting neutrality in this conflict* (Naumescu, 2022: 139-144). Certainly, with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the option of Russian collaboration with the West was partially out of the question, but now, after the tragic events that began with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, such a scenario is categorically becoming impossible.

Certainly, any rational and analytical mechanism of thinking in international relations tends to offer a rapprochement with China and the formation of a Sino-Russian pole at the international level as a response, but, as in any newly created alliance, *it must be based on the establishment of some rules regarding hierarchy* (Naumescu, 2022: 139), and the prestige assumed by Putin's re-emerging Russia cannot be satisfied with a secondary role, in the "shadow and back of Beijing", precisely from here arises the insecurity and fragility of such an alliance. We also cannot ignore fundamental differences culturally, politically, ideologically, and even about what a new world order should mean for both superpowers. The historical context, the old Sino-Russian rift, but also Beijing's clandestine policy of populating Eastern Siberia with ethnic Chinese pose serious problems to this alliance.

The formation of a third pole of power at the international level is not possible, Russia cannot engage a considerable number of states that *are capable of competing economically or militarily with the United States or the People's Republic of China* (Naumescu, 2022: 141). Moreover, the idea of neutrality in the Sino-American competition cannot be seen as an option for a superpower that wants to stand out at the global level. The only option that remains within Moscow's reach, therefore, is rapprochement with China, but in terms that do not harm Russian interests and prestige.

NATO and Russia are currently in a state of tension not seen since the Cold War. Against the background of accelerating tensions and the War in Ukraine, the negotiating bridge between Russia and the West seems to be disappearing. The alarm signal that the analyst in international relations, Agnia Grigas, brings in this context is the highlighting of a weakness that the alliance has in the Baltic countries, and more precisely, the considerable Russian minority, but which could be used by Moscow in organizing some rebellions, *which would lead to a pressing dilemma for NATO* (Grigas, 2016: 217): direct intervention and the possibility of a war with the Russian Federation or non-involvement and permanent discrediting of the North Atlantic Alliance.

On December 26, 2021, the Russian Federation completed three decades since its formation, commemorating otherwise the same period since the disappearance of the former Soviet Union, but what is interesting is the subsequent evolution of the balance of power, which in the course of 30 years, brought Russia back to the antagonistic position from which it started at the end of 1991, this being a circularity and symmetry that we can rarely see in history, high rarely in the field of international relations.

## 2. The War in Ukraine (february 24, 2022)

February 24, 2022, unfortunately, remains a fateful and sad day in the history of Ukraine and Europe. The legacy of lasting and long peace in Europe, from the end of the Second World War until now, has been shaken by a cruel, criminal and illegitimate decision. The Putin regime in Moscow shocked the whole world by invading Ukraine and placing Europe and the whole world in an *unprecedented tension in the international system* (Smith, 2022: 298). The dice of war were cast by Moscow, but the West has a historical mission to contribute to the fall of these dice in favor of Ukraine.

Although initially, the war in Donbas was identified entirely under the guise of an *ethnically motivated secessionist war* (Marples, 2022: 144-156), due to the Russian majority in eastern Ukraine, the massive intervention and the Russian invasion of Ukraine proved that this was not the case. Russia has always intended to keep Ukraine away from the chance of Euro-Atlantic integration, and when the Putin regime realized that this was no longer possible peacefully, it resorted to this latest method. Russia's intention and objectives are clear: the occupation of the country, the annexation of considerable territories of the Ukrainian state, and the installation of a pro-Russian puppet regime in Kyiv, which would allow the transformation of Ukraine into a buffer zone, an observation developed earlier in the previous chapter. As of this writing, none of these objectives have been fully accomplished, so the fate of the war remains to be decided in the coming months.

Even *without achieving the mentioned objectives* (Pascal, 2022: 299), a major problem for the geopolitical security of the Black Sea is the colossal illegitimate expansion of the Russian coastline. From 2008 to the present, Russia has gone from a Black Sea coastline of about 800 km to a total coastline of about 3,500 km, an incredible and extremely dangerous fact. More than 2,500 km of the Ukrainian coast came under Russian control, and half of the Georgian coastline, 150 km, is also under the control of the Russian Federation. In the adjacent image (Fig. 2: Russian control of the Black Sea), the important difference between Russia's rightful coastline (in blue) and the coastline illegally annexed and occupied by Russia (in red) can be easily seen. What must be understood from all this exposition is that Russian thalassocratic ambitions figured prominently as a complementary objective in Moscow's plans for the ex-Soviet space. Any military move by Russia also meant a continuation of expansionist ideals regarding the Black Sea.

One thing is certain, *no one can predict, at least not yet* (Pascal, 2022: 313), the outcome of the war in Eastern Europe. A Ukrainian victory against Russia could have a particularly important impact on the



**Fig. 2.** Russian control of the Black Sea

Putin regime and would lead to a loss of Russian control of the northern Black Sea. On the other hand, an unwanted Russian victory in Ukraine would pave the way for a Russian Federation to have full control of the Sea of Azov and majority control in the Black Sea, with more than half of the coastline. This latter scenario would represent a catastrophe for the other NATO member states with access to the Black Sea. States such as Romania,

Bulgaria, and Turkey would become obliged to increase their maritime security by purchasing new warships and improving the capabilities of the fleets they possess. At the same time, the fate of the war in Ukraine will play a particularly important role in the evolution of the international system. A Russian victory may pave the way for a military move by China against Taiwan and provide an incentive for the world's authoritarian states to resolve their differences militarily, which would return the international system to a new era of early realism.

### **Conclusions**

Throughout the history of Eastern Europe, Russia has always represented an actor difficult to ignore, and after the fall of the Soviet Union and the installation of Putin in power, Moscow became interested in the destiny of the ex-Soviet space again. The system of international relations is in a strong dynamic, and in the three decades since the end of the Cold War until now, the global balance of power has undergone far-reaching changes. Russia has gone from a pro-Western foreign policy in the 1990s to a true state of Cold War tension following its invasion of Ukraine this year. All these things also led to an increasingly aggressive foreign policy regarding the Black Sea and paved the way for the annexations or gaining control of the largest parts of the littorals of Ukraine and Georgia. Currently, Russia controls more than half of the Black Sea coast, and this affects militarily and economically NATO countries in the area, forced to increase their maritime capabilities.

There are many other elements worth mentioning in the discussion of Russia and its thalassocratic ambitions such as the role that Russia will play in the new Beijing-Moscow axis, the country's economic evolution, and the continuity of the Putin regime. All these things can weigh a lot in the future of the Black Sea. The global situation often tends to translate almost identically to areas or regions, with important interconnectivity between the regional and global balance of power.

The Russian Federation has always realized that it is a continental power, and throughout history, it has always faced the desire to gain access to warm seas, the northern seas not offering it the necessary strategic and economic advantages. Russia has always continued to pursue an expansionist policy in the Black Sea, even if it meant violating the sovereignty of states and international law. It is also a certainty that the attack on Georgia in August 2008, the annexation of Crimea in February 2014, and the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 were motivated by a whole series of factors such as the blocking of NATO and EU expansion, the expansion of Russia's sphere of influence, however, the thalassocratic objective regarding the Black Sea was also added in a complementary way to Russian goals in changing the international system.

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