

Russia's Belt of (In)Security

Dr. Gayane Novikova

New agendas were outlined in Russia's National Security Strategy, adopted on 2 July 2021. According to this document, Russia's external security concerns are multiplying. The West in general has been viewed as a major source of security threats. To prevent and fight them, Russia must build up its military might and improve cooperation with its partners.

Russia's National Security Strategy also noted an increased concentration on domestic issues and possible internal security threats.

Two major developments in the Mediterranean and Black Sea basins triggered Russia's intensified (reasonably aggressive) posture in these regions. Russia has viewed both the Arab Spring and the aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia for NATO membership as serious security threats. The third dimension – the US withdrawal from Afghanistan – has forced Russia to take several proactive measures.

Return to the Mediterranean

The Arab Spring, especially its Syrian theatre, has allowed Russia to return to the Mediterranean as an actor. Providing its full political-military and diplomatic support to the Bashar al-Assad regime in the course of the civil war in Syria, Russia has aimed first of all to secure and strengthen its multi-layered presence and economic interests in the Middle East in general and in the eastern Mediterranean in particular. On the eve of its direct military intervention, on 26 August 2015, a new Russian-Syrian agreement was signed: Russia received full access to the newly-built Khmeimim air base in Latakia province free of charge and for an unlimited time. Three months later, a Russian S-400 air defence missile system was deployed to this base (also to the Tartus naval base) after Turkey had shot down a Russian military jet.

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Photo: Kremlin.ru

On 18 March 2014, Russian President Putin signed a "Treaty on the adoption of the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol to Russia".

In 2017, Russia signed another agreement with the Syrian Government regarding the Tartus naval base which, after losing bases in Egypt and Libya, remained the only Russian foothold in the Mediterranean. In accordance with the new agreement, Russia leased the Tartus seaport for its Mediterranean Task Force free of charge for 49 years with the possibility of renewal for another 25 years. Moscow obtained full jurisdiction over the base and expanded its use for civilian business purposes. In May 2021, the two governments agreed that Russia would invest US\$500M to enlarge the naval base and to construct a floating dock. Simultaneously, the runway of the Khmeimim air base was extended; three TU-22M3 nuclear-capable long-range bombers were deployed for a series of training missions over the Mediterranean.

The second aspect of Russia's direct involvement in Syrian affairs aimed to prevent penetration of ISIS fighters into Russia's North Caucasus (a significant num-

ber were from Chechnya and Dagestan). Since the summer of 2015, Russia has continuously been using the Khmeimim air base to launch air strikes against "ISIS and other terrorist groups."

Russia's strong military presence in Syria has provided an opportunity for the restoration of its naval and air bases in Egypt and Libya. The joint manoeuvres conducted by Russian and Egyptian units, as well as a port visit by Russia's frigate ADMIRAL KASATONOV in Alexandria within the framework of its Mediterranean January-April 2021 voyage, can be viewed as first steps in this direction. The case with the Libyan bases is more complicated owing to the situation on the ground; however, according to satellite images, on 26 May 2020, six Russian MiG-29 FULCRUM and five Su-24 FENCERS were spotted in Libya at the al-Jufrah air base controlled by the Haftar Armed Forces. Besides, the "Wagner" Russian private military company has been used as a proxy for Russian interests in Libya.

“Red Lines” in the Black Sea

For Russia, control over the Black Sea is crucial. The attempts by Georgia and Ukraine to shift closer to NATO have been viewed as a serious security challenge, concern, and threat. To prevent such a scenario, Russia has violated the territorial integrity of both states.

As a result of the August 2008, war in Georgia, and its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia was able to strengthen and secure its military presence in these areas. In accordance with an agreement signed in February 2009, Russia and the Abkhazian authorities agreed that the Russian 7th military base could be stationed in Abkhazia for 49 years and that an automatic renewal for a subsequent 15 years would be possible. A similar agreement regarding the newly-established 4th Russian military base was signed with the South Ossetian authorities in April 2010. Hence, both semi-recognised state entities were gradually turned into completely militarised zones. Even in the long-term perspective, Georgia’s territorial integrity will not be restored.

Russia’s control over the north-eastern part of the Black Sea would not be sufficient without a naval base in Sevastopol, Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 secured Russia’s broad strategic interests in the Black Sea basin and its direct access to the Mediterranean. Russia made it clear that membership in NATO of Ukraine (and Georgia) constitutes that very red line that can provoke open military confrontation. Simultaneously, the level of confronta-

tion between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic structures has sharply increased.

At the Brussels Summit in June 2021, NATO emphasised: “The conflict in and around Ukraine is, in current circumstances, the first topic on our agenda.” In particular, it reaffirmed its commitment to support the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine (as well as of Georgia and Moldova) within its internationally recognised borders: “We strongly condemn and will not recognise Russia’s illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea, and denounce its temporary occupation. Russia’s recent massive military build-up and destabilising activities in and around Ukraine have further escalated tensions and undermined security. We call on Russia to reverse its military build-up and stop restricting navigation in parts of the Black Sea.”

The NATO Summit was followed by the Sea Breeze-2021 manoeuvres launched on 28 June by the US and Ukraine with the participation and support of 32 NATO members and allied states. The announced goals involved bringing Ukraine up to NATO standards, and an improvement of interoperability and multinational cooperation in regional peacekeeping activities. Although these exercises at sea, on land, and in the air have been an annual event led by Ukraine (Russia participated in 1998), Russia viewed them as an aggressive act and direct threat to – and violation of – its national security by Ukraine and its partners. At the end of June, Russia tested its S-400 air defence system in Crimea and on 1 July, in parallel with the NATO drills, carried out its own military exercises fo-

cused on air strikes against simulated enemy ships. According to President Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov, the desire of the current Government of Ukraine to solve its problems with Russia by joining NATO – “an anti-Russian military alliance” – constitutes a “red line.” The Russian leadership is “prepared to take measures to secure our borders and maintain the balance [parity] in Europe.” For this reason, Russia will take all necessary security measures “to deal with Ukrainian provocations.” It viewed the establishment of the “Crimea Platform” in August, 2021 as another “provocation.” The next round of military exercises in the Black Sea took place in September. Together with Belarus, Russia conducted a large multi-dimensional drill “Zapad-21” (10-16 September) that featured a scenario echoing the 2020 elections processes in Belarus: a coalition of NATO states intervened in Belarus to conduct a regime change. Ukraine, the US, and NATO responded with “Rapid Trident -2021” drills (23 September – 1 October) aimed “to prepare for joint actions as part of a multinational force during coalition operations.” On 23 September, Russia’s navy practised firing at targets in the Black Sea off the coast of Crimea using its BASTION coastal missile defence system.

Afghanistan ... Once Again?

The chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan actually left the Central Asian republics facing all the problems emanating from this war-torn country. To some extent the developments in and around Afghanistan can become problematic for Russia and its interests in the broader Central Asian region. Sources of its main security concerns are the threat of terrorism generated mainly by ISIS and al-Qaeda, and drug trafficking. Nonetheless, Russia will not interfere in Afghanistan’s internal affairs. However, it will provide all necessary support to the Central Asian states in order to prevent a spill-over of Afghan problems into these countries, and their possible involvement in proxy wars. Three mechanisms – with different effectiveness – can be utilised to maintain relative stability: a building of capacity of Russian military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan; a strengthening of the Russia-led political-military alliance – the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); and a stimulation of cooperation and operability among the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states.

In light of external security, Tajikistan is the most vulnerable among the Central Asian states. In autumn 2019, Russia deployed its S-300 anti-aircraft missile system to its 201st military base in Tajikistan; in 2021, it

Photo: Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation



Russia has been strengthening the Tajikistan Army in the wake of the Taliban taking control over Afghanistan. Depicted is a joint command post exercise with units of the Armed Forces of Russia and Tajikistan at Kharbmaidon training ground in Tajikistan on 14 March 2018.

was reinforced with the “KORNET” anti-tank missile systems (ATGM), 17 BMP-2, and a batch of 12.7 mm heavy machine guns NSV UTYOS. In addition, Russia decided to provide US\$1.1M to build a new outpost on the Tajik-Afghan border.

Russia’s Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan has also come into focus. In June 2020, the Russian-Kyrgyz agreement was amended: Russia will deploy an air defence system and develop infrastructure for UAVs. The base hosts Su-25 attack aircraft and Mi-8 helicopters. In July 2021, Russia and Kyrgyzstan discussed the possibility of establishing a new Russian military base to formally serve as the base for the Collective Operational Response Forces (designed to react to crises short of interstate conflicts) under CSTO auspices.

Besides increasing the defence capacities of its military bases in the region, Russia holds drills with its partners. On 30 July 2021, a Russian-Uzbek military exercise was held along Uzbekistan’s border with Afghanistan. On 5 August, Tajikistan joined this drill. A trilateral exercise aimed at the elimination of “illegal armed groups invading the territory of an allied state” continued through 10 August. It took place in close proximity to the Tajik-Afghan border.

Another drill, “Zapad/Interaction-2021,” organised by the Chinese side under joint Russian-Chinese command was carried out on 9-13 August in the north-western part of China. This was the first time the Russian military on a large scale has been invited to China to participate in a military exercise. Both sides indicated as the main theme a coordinated defence of peace and security in Central Asia. The goal was to boost “China-Russia strategic mutual trust, strengthening exchanges and cooperation between the two countries, and unleashing their combat capabilities.” Russian-Chinese military cooperation indicates the willingness to act together in the areas of their common strategic interests and to share responsibility.

It is obvious that the prevention of any negative developments in Central Asia is in Russia’s strategic interest. To avoid any direct involvement in Afghan problems, Russia strongly supports the activities of two international organisations, the CSTO and the SCO, aiming to stimulate their involvement in a stabilisation of the region.

On 16 September, at the CSTO Dushanbe Summit, the member states decided to deploy troops on the Tajik-Afghan border, emphasising in the Declaration the effectiveness of military exercises and the intention to continue this practice. On 17 September, the SCO held its head of state summit in Dushanbe. The member states



Photo: MoD China / Liu Fang

The joint Russian-Chinese Exercise ZAPAD/INTERACTION-2021 began on 9 August at a PLA training base in Qingtongxia City in western China’s Ningxia Hui autonomous region. The picture shows troops from China and Russia parading and two air squadrons at the opening ceremony.

of CSTO and SCO confirmed their intention to take collective action neutralising – or minimising – threats streaming from Afghanistan. The latter possesses Observer status in both organisations.

Instead of the Conclusion

Developments along Russia’s external borders require the precise attention of its political and military circles. In addition to complicated relations with the US, the EU, and China, Russia feels insecure to a certain degree as a result of: a) being surrounded by non-friendly Baltic States, Poland, Ukraine, and Georgia; b) trying to maintain balanced relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan; and c) attempting to avoid any problems in Central Asia in the aftermath of the Afghan crisis. Russia builds its security belt by either keeping or installing military bases, or involving – sometimes forcibly – vulnerable neighbouring states into its political, military, and economic spheres of influence. In the meantime, a more “egocentric” Russia conducts a selective foreign policy that focuses on those areas where it can gain maximum strategic advantage.

Furthermore, serious limitations are apparent in Russia’s multilateral security policy:

1) Moscow has used military intervention to prevent unwanted developments in the Mediterranean (Syria) and the Black Sea (Georgia and Ukraine) basins. However, viewed through the prism of its military capacity, in the Mediterranean region, Russia cannot compete with the US Sixth Fleet. Russia limits itself to demonstrations of its presence there.

In the Black Sea region, Russia’s strategic interests confront and compete with the interests of NATO, Turkey, Ukraine, and Georgia. Its modus operandi along all these axes varies: to some degree it accepts NATO’s activity in the Black Sea, manages a “mutual understanding” with Turkey despite Ankara’s position on Crimea, implements a hostile policy towards Ukraine, and ignores Georgia.

2) Although Russia has widened its military presence in the South Caucasus, it has lost its dominant position. In the aftermath of the 2020 Karabakh war, it was forced to accept Turkey’s growing political-military presence and activity in this region.

3) Russia possesses two mechanisms to control the situation in Central Asia: the CSTO, where it is a dominant power, and the SCO, where its interests compete first of all with China. To prevent negative developments emanating from Afghanistan, it needs to combine and coordinate the efforts of both organisations. However, the main obstacle is the serious rivalries that exist between their members and a lack of a joint strategic vision.

In general, Russia has shifted towards a more pragmatic approach to foreign affairs, concentrating on strengthening the weak links in its security belt, and applying multilateralism and regionalism. Confrontational tactics will be implemented only if Russia perceives a real threat to its security interests, such as the case of Ukraine. In all other cases, it will take preemptive low-cost measures, or will simply ignore selected developments. ■