



Playing the long game

Russia in the Mediterranean

No. 03 February 2025

Giangiuseppe Pili

Assistant Professor, Intelligence Analysis Program, James Madison University, Associate Fellow with the Proliferation and Nuclear Policy Research Group at RUSI, and Senior Non-Resident Associate Fellow, NATO Defense College

Alessio Armenzoni

Associate Fellow at the London-based Open Source Centre

Gary C. Kessler

President of Gary Kessler Associates, Principal Consultant at Fathom5, and Director of Maritime Hacking Village, Inc

Diane M. Zorri

Non-Resident Senior Fellow, Global and National Security Institute, University of South Florida

After the fall of the Bashar Al-Assad regime in early December 2024,¹ and the dictator now in Moscow,² Russia is possibly withdrawing its

Summary

Russia has firmly re-established its presence in the Mediterranean.

Satellite imagery and geospatial analysis reveal that Russia is currently more active in North Africa and the Middle East, including operating a shadow fleet of tankers that economically sustains Putin's regime and its war efforts in Ukraine.

Given its size and capabilities, the current Russian squadron is not intended to engage in a full-scale naval battle against any NATO fleet. Instead, it is deliberately kept weak enough to avoid being perceived as a major military threat.

¹ Brookings Experts, "The Assad Regime Falls. What Happens Now?," *Brookings*, December 9, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-assad-regime-falls-what-happens-now/#the-kremlin-suffers-a-major-setback-246>

² Maya Gebeily, Timour Azhari, "Assad Gets Asylum in Russia, Rebels Sweep Through Syria," *Reuters*, 8 December 2024, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-rebels-celebrate-captured-homs-set-sights-damascus-2024-12-07/>

military forces from Syria.³ Five Russian warships have left the Tartus naval base, and Russian forces are reportedly evacuating the Khmeimin Airbase in Latakia.⁴ However, for already a month, Russia is keeping open channels for trying to remain in Tartus, using the old agreement as a bait for legitimization of the future Syrian government.⁵ At the current time, there is no indication that these political efforts actually worked.⁶ As the future of Syria is uncertain, it remains unclear what role Russia will play in the country going forward, but it is likely to continue to be involved in some capacity, although even Russian outlets confirmed a clear loss.⁷ Meanwhile, Russia is already actively searching for other possible naval bases in the Mediterranean including Libya and even Egypt.⁸ The situation remains fluid, but not the Russian willingness to remain in the Mediterranean and possibly keeping the Tartus' naval base. The Russian presence in the Mediterranean Sea has been a constant feature of Russia's ambitions since the time of the Tsars. The early stages of the Cold War began immediately after WWII, with Stalin openly displaying ambitions for free passage through the Bosphorus Strait.⁹ Soviet power projection and direct pressure on countries in the Mediterranean were key reasons for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) stable presence in the region. Consequently, the Soviets established a permanent naval presence with the 5th Mediterranean Squadron, which could deploy up to 60 capable ships when necessary. Additionally, the USSR secured a foothold in Tartus, Syria and entered into multiple military and political agreements with North African countries.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the 5th Squadron was dismantled, and Russia appeared to adopt a more peaceful stance in the region.¹⁰ However, since Vladimir Putin came to power and Russia reasserted itself as a major global military power, the Mediterranean Sea has become a focal point once again. A flotilla was deployed, stronger ties with North African countries were established, and Soviet-era operational tactics were revived. Russian warships actively participated in the Syrian conflict, supporting Bashar Al-Assad's regime. Since the onset of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, a shadow fleet of tankers has been "laundering" Russian oil, circumventing international sanctions and providing Putin's regime with sufficient revenue to sustain the war effort in Ukraine. Russia has firmly re-established its presence in the Mediterranean, employing a multi-layered approach that, while limited in scope and opportunities, is nonetheless real.

This research aims to examine where Russia's current interests in the Mediterranean are concentrated, how they are pursued, and what NATO countries should consider in their foreign policies. The report is structured as follows: first, a general geopolitical overview of Russia's recent interests in the region is provided, followed by an overview of the main Russian outposts. An analysis of the current military and civilian naval presence is then offered. The research ends with recommendations NATO could consider.

The report is based on an extensive use of multiple data sources, including high-resolution and medium-resolution satellite imagery, synthetic aperture radar (SAR) satellite imagery and other sensors. Civilian ships were tracked by analysing Automatic Identification System (AIS) data, cross-referenced with other open source information. Geospatial analysis was employed to refine and visualize data analysis through calculations and measurements of ships, routes, port areas and port facilities. Imagery analysis was used to identify vessels and their geolocations. The overall structure of this report is based on an all-source intelligence data collection and analysis approach for depicting a faithful picture of what is currently unfolding in the Mediterranean Sea.

3 H I Sutton, "First Signs Russia Is Evacuating Navy Ships From Syria," *Naval News*, 3 December 2024, available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/12/first-sign-russian-navy-evacuating-naval-vessels-from-tartus-syria/>

4 OSINTtechnical on X, 7 December 2024, available at: <https://x.com/osinttechnical/status/1865540375965831380>

5 Abdulrahman Mansour, "After China, Russia Calls On Its Citizens To Leave Syria Immediately," *Egyptian Telegraph*, 6 December 2024, available at: HYPERLINK "<https://www.egypttelegraph.com/article/98144/%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88-%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7>"link. (AI generated translation). And for Libya: Maritime Executive, "As Syrian Rebels Advance, Russian Navy Leaves Port of Tartus," *Maritime Executive*, 6 December 2024, available at: <https://maritime-executive.com/article/as-syrian-rebel-advance-russian-navy-leaves-port-of-tartus>

6 Edward Black, Sidharth Kaushal, "Russia's Options For Naval Basing in the Mediterranean After Syria's Tartus," *RUSI*, January 2025, available at: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-options-naval-basing-mediterranean-after-syrias-tartus>,

7 "At least five Russian warships disappear from Tartus base in Syria," see more at <https://english.pravda.ru/news/hotspots/161311-russia-warships-tartus/>

8 Edward Black, Sidharth Kaushal, "Russia's Options For Naval Basing in the Mediterranean After Syria's Tartus."

9 Mark Galeotti, *A Short History of Russia. How the World Largest Country Invented Itself, From the Pagans to Putin* (Harlequin, 2020).


10 Chrēstos L. Rozakēs, *Turkish Straits* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), p. 43.




Figure 1. Map of the Mediterranean Sea – Russian perspective
Sources: ESRI, Kepler.GL, Wikipedia, Authors.

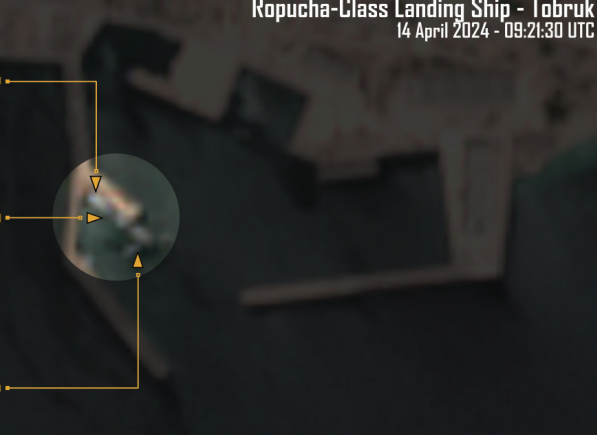
Ropucha class (Project 775) Landing Ship Spotted in Tobruk, Libya Multiple Identification

Ropucha-Class Landing Ship
An Example





Ropucha-Class Landing Ship - Tobruk
14 April 2024 - 09:21:30 UTC



General Characteristics

Length = 112.6 (Project 775/II - 112.55, Project 775/III - 112.63)
 Beam = 15 (Project 775/III - 15.01)
 Draft = 4.05
 Speed (knots) = 17.59
 Range = 3400 nmi (18 kts), 3500 nmi (16 kts), 4000 nmi (12 kts)
 Autonomy (days) = 30
 Complement = 98 (17 officers)

Reported Cargo Capacity

10 main battle tanks and 340 troops
 or 12 PT-76 light tanks
 and 150 troops or 3 main battle tanks,
 3 2S9 Nona-S, 5 MT-LB,
 4 army trucks and 313 troops
 or 20 army trucks
 and 150 troops or 500 tons of cargo

Sources
 European Space Agency,
 Google Earth, Army Recognition,
 Russianships.Info, Wikipedia,
 Guide to Soviet Navy
 Dr. Giangiuseppe Pili

Figure 2. Tobruk Port with Russian Ropucha-class on 11 April 2024
Sources: European Space Agency, Google Earth, Army Recognition, Russianships.Info, Wikipedia, Guide to Soviet Navy, Dr. Giangiuseppe Pili, Authors.

State of play

Soviet, and now Russian, strategists all agree on the need to keep a foothold in the Mediterranean (Figure 1). In recent times, Russia has maintained a significant presence in sub-Saharan Africa and Western Africa with private military companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group,¹¹ among others. The North African presence is the result of the Russians' need to stay in the region, to create a logistical lifeline for their interests in the other African sectors,¹² and to find economic opportunities, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is close to critical oil countries and new oil fields.¹³ As a consequence, the Russian presence in North Africa is unequally distributed and marked by an opportunistic approach. Perhaps the best illustration of this is the strong Russian presence in Libya and Syria, where Russia is paralleling "Cold War dynamics" seeking "competition, jockeying for pre-eminence, a frantic quest for clients and protégés, and rising competition in the economic, political, security, military and ideological spheres."¹⁴ This still holds, but possibly at a much lower level in all those domains of power rivalry. However, Russia maintains friendly relations and closer ties with Algeria, it conducts limited military drills and continues investing in Egypt, and it could be starting to consider Morocco as another country of interest.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Russia has been consolidating its presence in Libya.

According to a report by *All Eyes on Wagner*, there is evidence of a recent deployment of 1,800 Russian soldiers to Libya,¹⁶ in addition to the reported 800 military personnel already present.¹⁷ A Ropucha-class amphibious landing ship was deployed in the port of Tobruk already on 8 April 2024 (Figure 2).¹⁸ The Wagner Group, now rebranded as Afrika Corps by the Russian MoD, is also reportedly moving weapons from the Central African Republic to Libya.¹⁹ *The Libya Observer* also reported the presence of the cruiser Varyag and the frigate Admiral Shaposhnikov.²⁰ These two ships were moved from the Pacific Fleet to the Mediterranean theatre in March 2024, an identified organizational tactic known since Soviet times.²¹ Reports also flag the presence of the so-called "Libyan Express", a route for the redeployment of weapons from Tartus. A significant number of containers were moved to reinforce the Russian presence in Libya.²² Moreover, multiple sources seem to suggest that the Russians are making deals with General Khalifa Haftar.²³ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was sent directly to speak with Haftar on 28 February 2024.²⁴ The Wagner group²⁵ is still a significant presence in Africa, although not as strong as in the pre-Ukraine war era.²⁶ *Meduza* reported that Russian military personnel, vehicles and weapons were present in several places all around Cyrenaica and inland, specifically at least in Ghardabiya Airbase, Benina Airport, Al Marj, Al Khadim Airbase, Tobruk Port and port area, Al Juffra Airbase, and Brak Al Shati airbase.²⁷ There is an open Russian corridor between the Tobruk dockyard and

- 11 Joe Inwood & Jake Tacchi, "Wagner in Africa: How the Russian Mercenary Group Has Rebranded," *BBC African Eye*, 20 February 2024, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68322230>. Now renamed "Afrika Corps."
- 12 The Russian presence in Africa can be seen as a tree: the roots are in the West and Sub-Saharan Africa, the trunk is the Sahara Desert and the leaves are the outposts in the Mediterranean Sea between North Africa and the Middle East. For a detailed account, Liam Karr, "Africa File, May 16, 2024: Russia Outreach Across Africa," *Institute for the Study of War*, 16 May 2024, available at: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/africa-file-may-16-2024-russian-outreach-across-africa>.
- 13 See a Russian source which reports interesting considerations about Russian interests in the Middle East and related dynamics: Ruslan Mamedov, "Russia: Towards a Balance of Interests in the Eastern Mediterranean," *Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)*, 2021, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russia-towards-a-balance-of-interests-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>.
- 14 Florence Gaub, Nicu Popescu, "Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?," 1 July 2018, pp. 13-20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21138.5>, p. 13.
- 15 See Africa Intelligence, "Russian boats banned from Europe find safe haven in Agadir," Africa Intelligence, March 2024, available at: <https://www.africaintelligence.com/north-africa/2024/03/21/russian-boats-banned-from-europe-find-safe-haven-in-agadir,110194461-gra>; Also see Africa Intelligence, "Russian delegation to visit Casablanca to promote cereals sales," Africa Intelligence, November 2024, available at: <https://www.africaintelligence.com/north-africa/2024/11/19/russian-delegation-to-visit-casablanca-to-promote-cereals-sales,110341310-art>
- 16 "Mediterranean Sea Objective for the African Corps," *All Eyes on Wagner*, 10 May 2024, available at: <https://alleysonwagner.org/2024/05/10/mediterranean-sea-objective-for-the-african-corps/>.
- 17 Karr, "Africa File – May 16, 2024: Russia Outreach Across Africa."
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 "Al Khadim Airbase, An Essential Russian Outpost in Libya," *All Eyes on Wagner*, 18 March 2024, available at: <https://alleysonwagner.org/2024/03/18/al-khadim-airbase-an-essential-russian-outpost-in-libya/>.
- 20 Safa Harathy, "Russian Warships Dock in Haftar-Held Tobruk For Training, Security Boost," *The Libya Observer*, 18 June 2024, available at: <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/russian-warships-dock-haftar-held-tobruk-training-security-boost>
- 21 For more on this point, see below.
- 22 Tom Kington, "Russia Funneling Weapons Through Libyan Port, Eying Gateway to Africa," *Defense News*, 19 April 2024, available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/04/19/russia-funneling-weapons-through-libyan-port-eying-gateway-to-africa/>.
- 23 "East Libya Commander Haftar in Moscow for Talks with Putin," Al Jazeera, www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/28/east-libya-commander-haftar-in-moscow-for-talks-with-putin. Frédéric Bobin, "Libya: The Security Relationship Between Khalifa Haftar and Moscow Is Intensifying," *Le Monde*, 11 October 2023, available at: www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/10/11/libya-the-security-relationship-between-khalifa-haftar-and-moscow-is-intensifying_6162923_124.html. Accessed 30 Sept. 2024.
- 24 Safa Harathy, "Lavrov Affirms Support For Libya, Plans Consulate in Benghazi," *The Libya Observer*, 14 May 2024, available at: <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/lavrov-affirms-support-libya-plans-consulate-benghazi>.
- 25 John A. Lechner, "Is Africa Corps a Rebranded Wagner Group?," *Foreign Policy*, February 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/07/africa-corps-wagner-group-russia-africa-burkina-faso/>
- 26 Jack Watling, Oleksandr V Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, "The Threat From Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022-24," *Royal United Services Institute*, 20 February 2024, available at: <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/threat-russias-unconventional-warfare-beyond-ukraine-2022-24>.
- 27 "A Big Mess is Brewing – Thousands of Russian Fighters are Flooding into Libya," *Meduza*, 16 May 2024, available at: <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/05/16/a-big-mess-is-brewing>.

the Syrian port of Tartus used by warships and “the ghost fleet” to move weapons.²⁸ The Libyan case is probably the most remarkable because of the multiple layers of interests and actors: the Russians were able to secure a relatively stable presence between various airbases and the port of Tobruk, where their military vessels are so regularly stationed that an agreement for stabilizing the access could be considered.²⁹

Russian relations with Algeria are the friendliest in the area, as they include weapons trade, economic ties and a relatively stable political narrative. According to a recent study, “Algeria rose from the 22nd to the 6th largest recipient of global arms transfers, with Russia supplying

93% of these weapons, including fighters, two submarines, long-range surface-to-air missile systems, and nearly 200 T-90 tanks.”³⁰ As a result, “Algeria was Russia’s third largest customer, purchasing 14% of its total arms exports.”³¹ Russian economic investments were important to develop various industries, including oil and gas extraction.³² However, the geopolitical environment of its partner has led Russia to remain cautious, as Algeria and Morocco have been experiencing extremely tense relations and border issues.³³

Morocco is considered a “friendly country” and a place where Russian economic and strategic interests overlap, although with less reported involvement so far. Moreover, the complicated and tense relations with Algeria do not

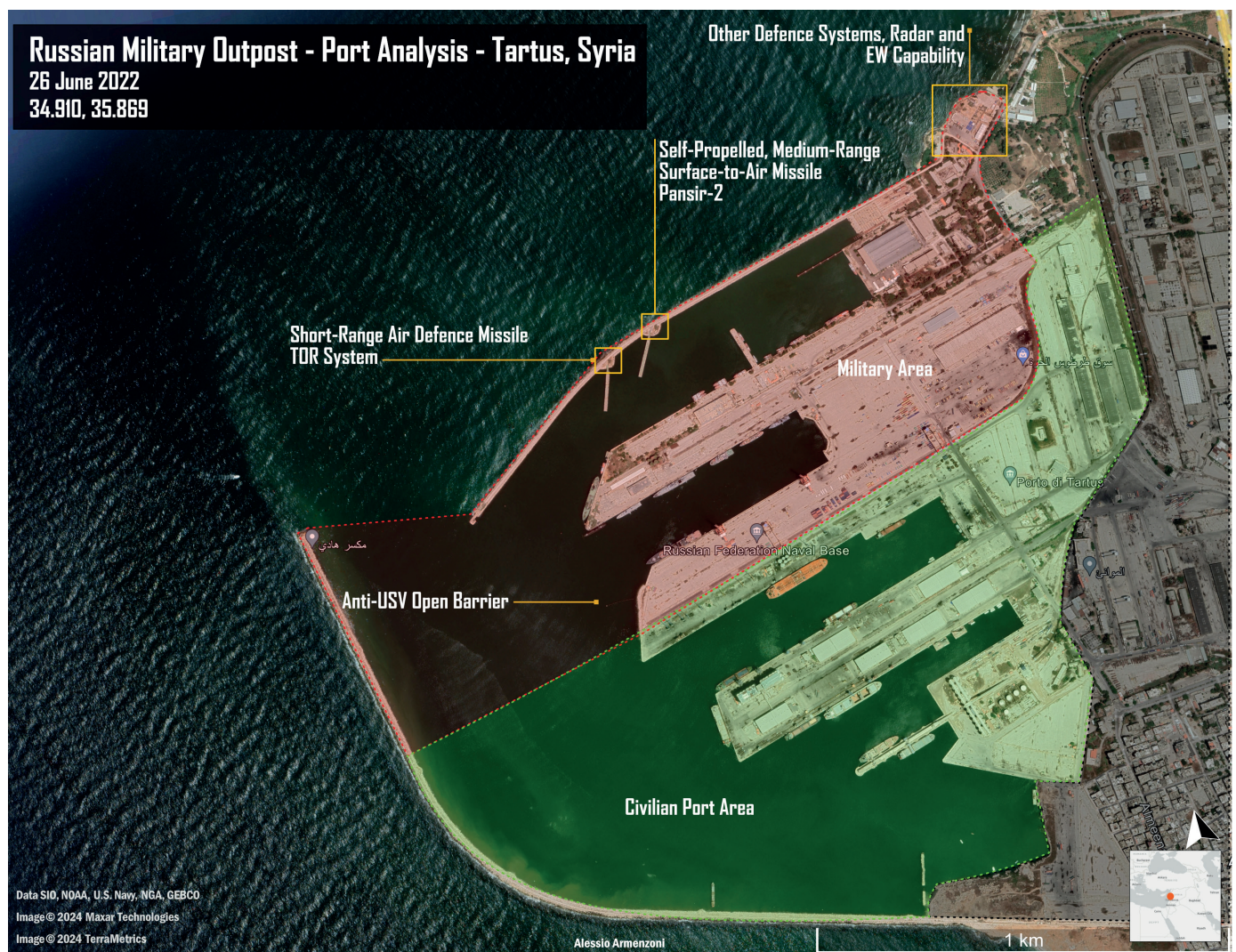


Figure 3. Tartus port – An analysis

Sources: Google Earth, Authors.

28 Michael Petersen et al., “Assessing Russian Plans For Military Regeneration,” *Chatham House*, 9 July 2024, available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/07/assessing-russian-plans-military-regeneration/05-russias-navy-and-naval-platforms>

29 *Ibid.*

30 Robert Springborg and F.C. “Pink” Williams, “Russian Security Assistance to Algeria and Egypt,” in Chloé Berger and Cynthia Salloum (eds.), “Russia in NATO’s South: Expansionist Strategy or Defensive Posture?,” *NDC Research Paper 16*, January 2021.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*

33 For a Russian source and assessment of the country: Vasilenko, A., Kuznetsov, V., “Setting Priorities: Algeria’s Foreign Policy and Opportunities for Moscow,” *Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)*, 5 June 2024, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/setting-priorities-algeria-s-foreign-policy-and-opportunities-for-moscow/>

facilitate cooperation with Russia.³⁴ Morocco's Atlantic coast is a place of interest, where the Russians are possibly seeing opportunities for logistics and economic ventures, such as in the port of Agadir. According to *Africa Intelligence*,³⁵ Casablanca-based Chantiers et Ateliers du Maroc (CAM) – a shipbuilding company active in Agadir – was liquidated and then acquired in October 2023 by three Russian nationals and one Moroccan, who now hold a majority stake in the firm.³⁶ The acquisition could be a murky business as the company was reportedly acquired “underpriced”.

According to the report, the Russian initiative was driven by the renewed need to repair mainly fishing vessels, which cannot enter European Union (EU) ports. As in the Middle East and other regional countries, Russian initiatives are related to the energy sector and oil production, which remains a power projection tool in Russia's soft-power arsenal. Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation signed a Memorandum of Understanding for operating nuclear-powered desalination plants in Morocco and its Atlantic ports, which seems to suggest a growing Russian interest in the country.³⁷ It is reported that there are investments in Agadir's general port area and infrastructure. The port of Agadir is able to host military vessels, as attested by the presence of the Royal Moroccan Navy base on the southern pier, with a reported maximum depth of 10.5 metres – enabling it to host several major Russian military vessels such as the Ropucha-class – and with a cargo capacity of more than 150,000 containers per year.³⁸ On-and-off cooperation with maritime fisheries, initially established in 1992, has continued mostly uninterrupted since 2013.

The political and economic landscape in which Russia is moving in North Africa, as the Libyan case suggests, is reactive, erratic and volatile. This has led the Russian Federation to develop a naval system able to perform basic duties in the Mediterranean Sea, to defend Russia's main interests, and to project power when possible, consolidating what Russia had already been able to secure after the fall of the Soviet Union.³⁹ Russia's efforts to maintain its historical

presence in the region will be clearer after looking closer to where the naval presence is located, its makeup, how it operates, and its main bases and routes. The outlook starts with Tartus, Syria.

Russia in Syria

Tartus is a major port city located on the Western Syrian shores at coordinates 34°53'N, 35°53'E. The port area faces the eastern Mediterranean Sea and is one of two main Syrian harbours, along with Latakia, the largest port in Syria, which are connected through a highway and one of the few railroads still functioning in Syria, according to recent satellite imagery.⁴⁰ The port infrastructure is classified as a multifunctional commercial port capable of handling any type of cargo from bulk or containers to liquid commodities from tankers of up to 120,000 DWT.⁴¹ The port hosts the main overseas naval base of the Russian Federation (Figure 3).

Relations between Syrians and Russians in Tartus have a long and established history. Syria and the Soviet Union agreed to establish a naval supply and maintenance facility in Tartus in 1974.⁴² The agreement allowed the Soviet 5th Mediterranean Squadron (пятая эскадра), known also as the 5th Ship Flotilla (or Eskadra), to be stationed in a special section of the port, using it as a base. After Egyptian President Anwar Sadat expelled Soviet military advisers in 1972 and shifted to a pro-Western stance, the Soviet support bases in Egypt were evacuated in 1972 and 1975.⁴³ In 1984, the Tartus base was upgraded to the 720th Material-Technical Support Point, allowing access to submarines. As the Soviet Union was collapsing, the Mediterranean fleet was disbanded in May 1991,⁴⁴ but the Tartus base has remained a logistics hub for Russia's Black Sea, Baltic and Pacific Fleets.⁴⁵

In 2005, Russia forgave most of Syria's Soviet-era debt.⁴⁶ During those years, talks between Dmitry Medvedev and

34 As reported by a Russian source: Vasily Kuznetsov, Anastasia Vasilenko, “Setting Priorities: Algeria's Foreign Policy and Opportunities for Moscow,” *Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)*, 5 June 2024, available at: https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/setting-priorities-algeria-s-foreign-policy-and-opportunities-for-moscow/?phrase_id=149901589.

35 “Russian Boats Banned from Europe Find Safe Haven in Agadir,” *Africa Intelligence*, 21 March 2024, available at: <https://www.africaintelligence.com/north-africa/2024/03/21/russian-boats-banned-from-europe-find-safe-haven-in-agadir,110194461-gra>.

36 SignalHire, “Chantiers et Ateliers du Maroc Overview,” available at: <https://www.signalhire.com/companies/chantiers-et-ateliers-du-maroc>

37 Michaël Tanchum, “Morocco's Nuclear Option: Russian vs US Technological Cooperation to Power Its Water Scarcity Solutions,” *Middle East Institute*, 10 August 2023, available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/moroccos-nuclear-option-russian-vs-us-technological-cooperation-power-its-water>.

38 See “Morocco - 2.1 Port Assessment,” *Logistic Cluster*, 2022, available at <https://dlca.logcluster.org/morocco-21-port-assessment>

39 For a precedent, see Pascal Ausseur, Pierre Razoux, “Russian Naval Strategy in NATO's Southern Flank,” in Chloe Berger, Cynthia Salloum, (eds.), “Russia in NATO's South,” *NDC Research Paper 16*, NATO Defense College, January 2021, pp. 24-25.

40 Satellite imagery provided by Planet Labs.

41 See below for a list of tankers identified in the port.

42 Milan Vego, “Soviet and Russian Strategy in the Mediterranean since 1945,” in John B. Hattendorf (ed.), *Naval Strategy and Policy in the Mediterranean*, Routledge, Oxford, 2000, p. 177.

43 Charles W. Jones, “Soviet Access to Port Facilities,” in Bruce M. Watson, Susan M. Watson (eds.), *The Soviet Navy. Strengths and Liabilities* (Routledge Oxford 1986), p. 272.

44 Milan Vego, “Soviet and Russian Strategy in the Mediterranean since 1945,” p. 182.

45 Authors' analysis on Russian vessels at the port. See also: Thomas R. Fedyszyn, “The Russian Army 'Rebalances' to the Mediterranean,” in *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 139/12/1,330. Retrieved from: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2013/december/russian-navy-rebalances-mediterranean>.

46 Nikolay Kozhanov, “Russian Syrian Dialogue: Myths and Realities,” in *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, vol. 5, n. 1, 2014, pp. 1-22. On the reconstruction, see also: <https://minstroyrf.gov.ru/press/v-minstroe-rossii-obsudili-torgovo-ekonomicheskoe-sotrudnichestvo-rossiyskoy-federatsii-s-siriyskoy-/>.



Figure 4. Anti-Aircraft Pantsir-S2 in Tartus, Syria – 2017 and 2024
Sources: *Army Recognition*, Russian MoD, *Forums.airbase.ru*, Cesium, Authors.

Bashar Al-Assad began on expanding the Tartus base.⁴⁷ The governments discussed turning Tartus into a permanent naval base for Russia's nuclear-armed ships⁴⁸ and renovations of the Tartus port area began, until the two countries reached a final agreement on a 49-year usage in 2017, with the possibility of automatic renewal every 25 years.⁴⁹ The presence of Russian ships has been documented and solidly established since then, including during the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war. The Mediterranean Squadron was “resurrected” in 2013, with units assembled from multiple fleets but mainly from the Black Sea Fleet.⁵⁰ The Squadron was subsequently enhanced to make it more efficient, substituting ex-Soviet platforms with others more appropriate for contemporary warfare. As part of the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war in support of Bashar Al-Assad's government, the Squadron participated in multiple littoral missions, including missile strikes, a function later seen performed in the war in Ukraine by the Black Sea Fleet, especially in Odesa. Since 2017, the Squadron has adopted a strategy reminis-

cent of the Soviet era, rotating warships from different fleets while maintaining a state of constant readiness.⁵¹

Port area capacity and defence systems in Tartus

The military part of the Tartus base pertains to the 720th Material-Technical Support Point of the Russian Navy and is relatively limited in terms of overall capacity.⁵² Improvements were made to avoid the need to bring spare parts in from Russia by producing them on-site.⁵³ In high-resolution satellite imagery taken on 25 June 2022, a possible Syrian military vessel is visible in dry dock, possibly scrapped.⁵⁴ The military area of the port is guarded by military outposts and walls,⁵⁵ and has different types of defence sys-

⁴⁷ Aleksey Sarabyev, *Russia-Syrian Present-Future: Naval Aspect*, Russia International Affairs Council, 31 October 2011, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russia-syrian-present-future-naval-aspect/>.

⁴⁸ TASS Пункт материально-технического обеспечения ВМФ России в Тартусе. Досье (“The Russian Navy's Logistics Point in Tartus – A Dossier”), 13 December 2017, available at: <https://tass.ru/info/4808523>.

⁴⁹ Ria Novosti, *Путин внес в ГД соглашение о расширении пункта обеспечения ВМФ в Тартусе* (“Putin submitted to the State Duma an agreement on the expansion of the naval support point in Tartus”), 13 December 2017, available at: <https://ria.ru/20171213/1510800603.html>.

⁵⁰ TASS, “The Russian Navy's Logistics Point in Tartus – A Dossier”; Thomas R. Fedyszyn, “The Russian Army ‘Rebalances’ to the Mediterranean.”

⁵¹ As became standard practice in the 1970s. On this see: Carl G. Jacobsen, “The Soviet Navy: Acquiring Global Capabilities and Perspectives,” in *Naval War College Review*, vol. 24, n. 7, 1972, pp. 41-52. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44641296>.

⁵² Milan Vego, “Soviet and Russian Strategy in the Mediterranean since 1945,” p. 179.

⁵³ “Mereväebaas Süürias kinnistab Venemaa kanda Vahemerel,” *Maailm*, 2019, available at: <https://maailm.postimees.ee/6788055/merevaebaas-suurias-kinnistab-venemaa-kanda-vahemerel>.

⁵⁴ Sources: Maxar Technology (Google Earth), Authors.

⁵⁵ This is visible from the satellite, for instance in Google Earth. The perimeter of the port can be seen in Open Street Maps.

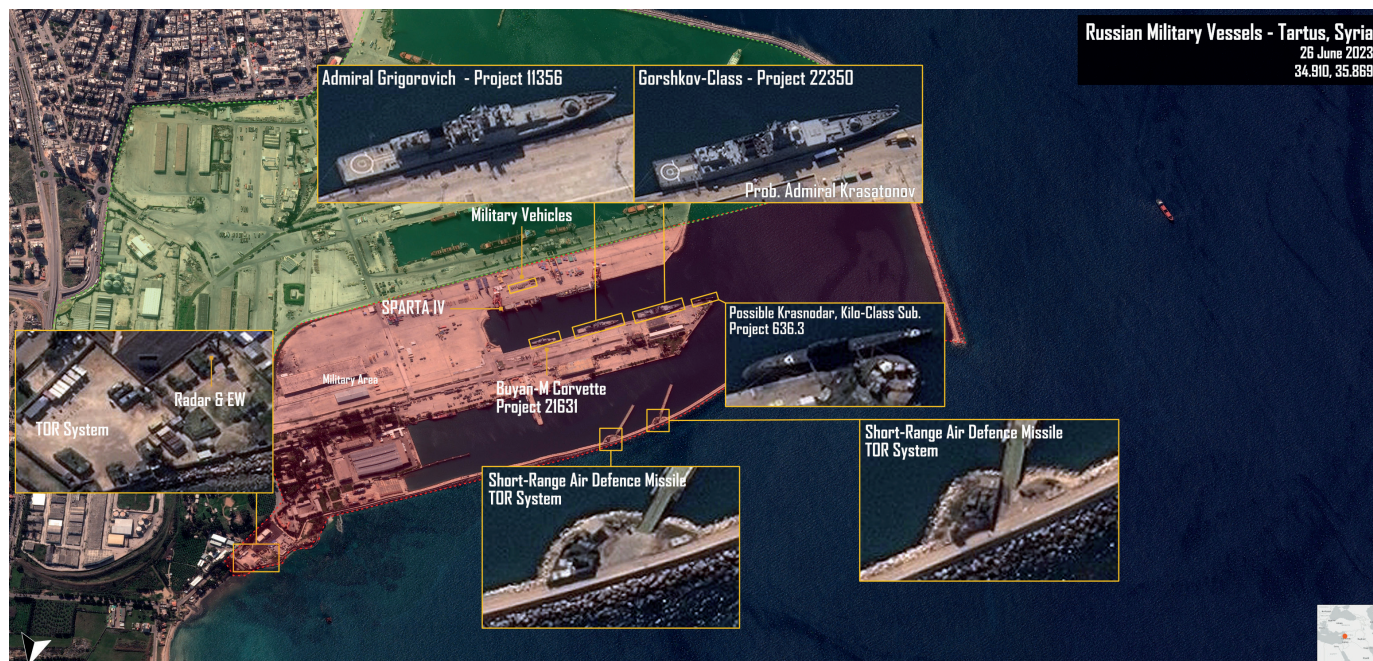


Figure 5. Tartus Port – Full high-resolution satellite picture with all the ships
Sources: Maxar Technologies, RUSI-OSIA, Authors.

tems. For instance, two air defence systems were identified on the southern breakwater, including a short-range air defence TOR missile system (probably the M-2 version),⁵⁶ and an anti-aircraft Pantsir-S2 armed with 57E6-E missiles, partially camouflaged by nets and crates, with a reported range of 30 km (with a radar detection capability up to 40 km).⁵⁷ While the TOR is easily visible because of its shape and marked exposure, the presence of the Pantsir-S2 cannot be uniquely identified by satellite imagery (Figure 4). It is noteworthy that a photo circulated on Twitter on 5 October 2017.⁵⁸ Video footage posted by the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) clearly shows the presence of a self-propelled, medium-range surface-to-air missile Pantsir-S2 in Tartus in June 2024.⁵⁹ The system has been present for at least seven years as short-range air defence. In contrast, the S-300 and S-400 systems could not be located via open sources, although their presence is documented in the area since 2016.⁶⁰ K300-P Bastion anti-ship missiles are also present in the Tartus port facility, as shown in the same video (Figure 4).⁶¹ In the northeastern part of the harbour, which corresponds to the southwestern part of the port, Syrian gunships armed with P-15 or P-25 anti-ship missiles can also be observed.⁶²

The anti-aircraft and anti-ship defence systems present in the port, therefore, are structured as a multi-level defence apt to cover the short, medium and long range but would appear to be present in small numbers (one item per model, except for the Bastion systems), likely because the defences are aimed at preventing minor fire exchanges between Syrian non-state actors rather than facing the full might of NATO forces.

Satellite imagery and geospatial analysis were used to count the number of docked vessels and derive an overall average presence in Tartus. In addition, movements were identified through route analysis and the monitoring of choke points, such as the Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal and the Bosphorus, in order to obtain a general understanding of the movements and main areas of transit. As the Mediterranean Squadron does not count as an official “fleet”, it is composed of ships from the other fleets and they vary over time.⁶³ For example, in 2021, the Moskva – since sunk by a Ukrainian Neptune missile – was part of the Black Sea Fleet and joined the Mediterranean task force from 18 June to 5 July, before returning to the Black Sea.⁶⁴ Usually, four or five warships, including Grigorovich- and Gorshkov-class frigates as well as

⁵⁶ See *Army Recognition*, “SA-15D TOR-M2 TOR-M2E TOR-M2K,” *Army Recognition*, 17 May 2024, available at: <https://armyrecognition.com/military-products/army/air-defense-systems/air-defense-vehicles/tor-m2-russia-uk>.

⁵⁷ See *Army Recognition*, “Pantsir-S2,” *Army Recognition*, 17 May 2024, available at: <https://armyrecognition.com/military-products/army/air-defense-systems/air-defense-vehicles/pantsir-s2-short-range-cannon-missile-air-defense-system-technical-data-sheet-specifications-pictures-video-12205164>.

⁵⁸ X account SOVA (@Russian_Defence): https://x.com/Russian_Defence/status/916057405720616966.

⁵⁹ It is still available here, where it shows interesting details of the exercise: <https://zmaps.info/embed/916518/>.

⁶⁰ BBC, “Syria conflict: Russia sends missile system to Tartus base,” *BBC*, 4 October 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-37557138>.

⁶¹ The video circulated on X as well: <https://x.com/warintel4u/status/1799381012159537550>.

⁶² See figure 5.

⁶³ Authors’ observations and analysis.

⁶⁴ Interfax, “Группировка российских кораблей в Черном море усиливается на фоне учений Sea Breeze” (The grouping of Russian ships in the Black Sea is strengthening against the backdrop of the Sea Breeze exercises), July 2021, available at: <https://www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=0&nid=552728&lang=RU>.

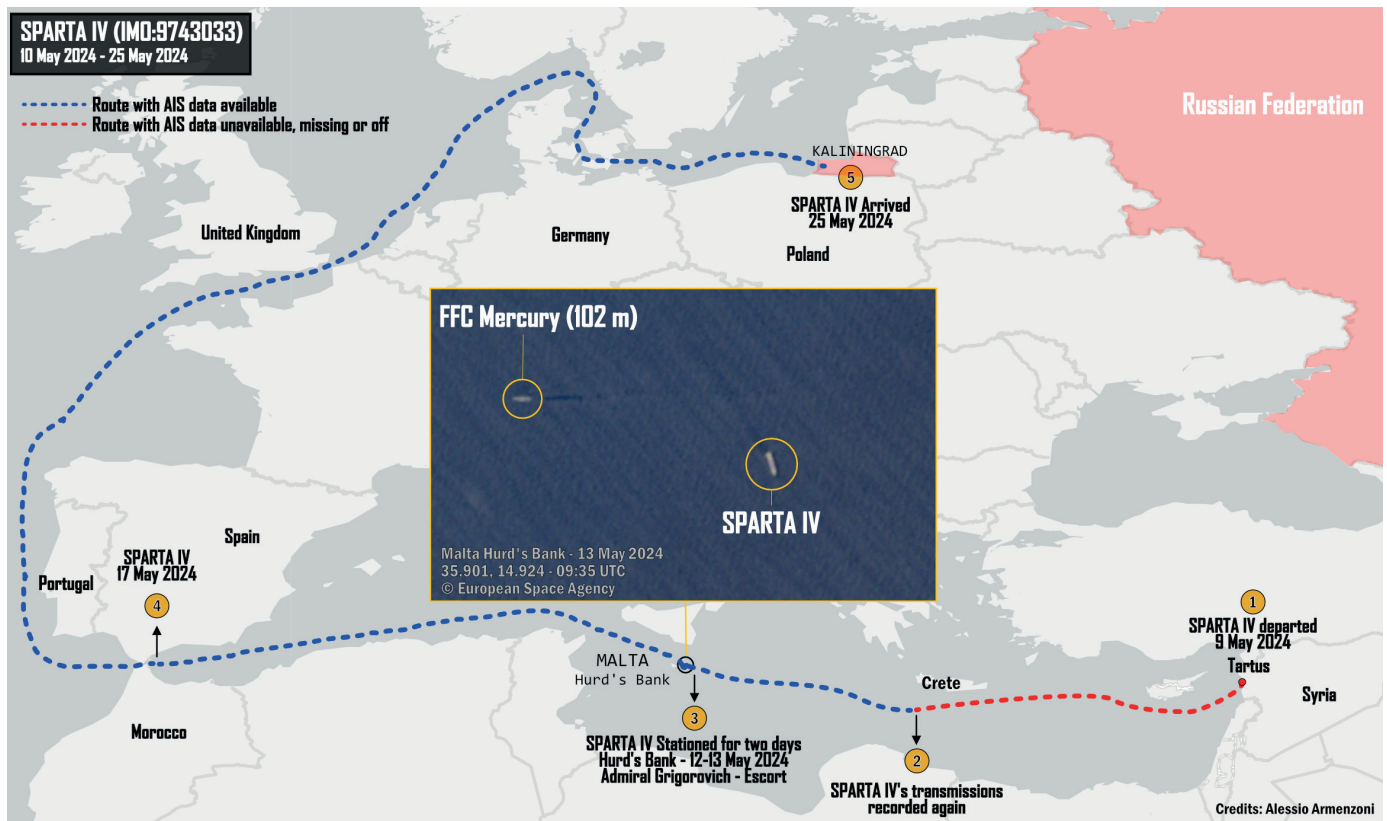


Figure 6. The New Route of the Syrian Express after the possible application of the Montreux convention on Oboronlogistics vessels.

Sources: AIS data provided by Global Fishing Watch, European Space Agency, ESRI, Authors.

Steregushchiy-class corvettes, are visible along with one to two Kilo-class submarines (Figure 5).⁶⁵ Satellite imagery dated 26 February 2023 shows the Admiral Grigorovich frigate (project 11356)⁶⁶ docked at the port. The Admiral Grigorovich was deployed in the Mediterranean Sea as far back as 2016 as part of the operations to destroy depots and ammunition warehouses in Idlib and Homs provinces in Syria.⁶⁷ The picture also shows what are possibly the Admiral Krasatonov (Gorshkov-class frigate) and the Orekhovo-Zuyevo (Buyan-M-class corvette). The Krasnodar Kilo-class submarine has also been identified. Kilo-class submarines were employed in active duty in 2015 and 2016 to target rebels and jihadi groups.⁶⁸ Although they moved back and forth within the Mediterranean Sea, they were spotted in Tartus regularly, including the Krasnodar (Figure 5 and Figure 9). The latter left Tartus in November 2023,⁶⁹ to be replaced by the Ufa (project 636.3).⁷⁰ The Ufa, which belongs to the Pacific Fleet,

entered the Mediterranean in December 2023, escorted by the Sergey Balk tug (IMO: 9803182) and the Kama tanker (MMSI: 273540290) – through which the arrival of the diesel-electric submarine was noticed.⁷¹ The transit was also accompanied by the Portuguese Navy, and since then the Ufa has been based in Tartus (Figure 5).⁷² Moreover, the piers normally dedicated to military vessels regularly hosted “special vessels” which were officially described as civilian cargo ships. They were, in fact, part of the military logistics, including the SPARTA IV (IMO: 9743033) and SPARTA II (IMO: 9160994), among other ships of a sanctioned company directly owned by the Russian MoD (Figure 6).⁷³ These ships regularly docked to move military equipment destined either for the Ukrainian battlefield or for Moscow’s other African partners. This ordnance included S-300s, “12 probable 130 mm M-46 field guns, 18 probable 122 mm D-30 howitzers, 12 probable 152 mm howitzers, and 10 probable 57 mm S-60

⁶⁵ Satellite imagery provided by Maxar Technologies, Planet Labs, and European Space Agency.

⁶⁶ “Guard Ships, Project 11356,” *RussianShips.Info*, 2009-2024, available at: https://russianships.info/eng/warships/project_11356.htm.

⁶⁷ See ODN, “Admiral Grigorovich-Class (Project 11356 Class) Russian Frigate,” *OE Data Integration Network*, [https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/WEG/Asset/Admiral_Grigorovich-Class_\(Project_11356_Class\)_Russian_Frigate](https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/WEG/Asset/Admiral_Grigorovich-Class_(Project_11356_Class)_Russian_Frigate)

⁶⁸ See Igor Delanoë, “Russian Naval Forces in the Syrian War,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/report-chapter-6-delanoë.pdf>, p. 4.

⁶⁹ “Unable to Return to Black Sea Fleet Submarine Krasnodar Heads to Kronstadt,” *Seawaves Magazine*, available at: <https://seawaves.com/unable-to-return-to-black-sea-fleet-submarine-krasnodar-heads-to-kronstadt/>.

⁷⁰ “Large Submarines,” *RussianShips.Info*, 2009-2024, available at: https://russianships.info/eng/submarines/project_877.htm.

⁷¹ Authors’ analysis.

⁷² “Navios Da Marinha Acompanham Navios Russos,” 15 December 2023, <https://www.marinha.pt/pt/media-center/Noticias/Paginas/Navios-da-Marinha-acompanham-navios-russos.aspx>.

⁷³ Gianguseppe Pili, Jack Crawford, Nick Loxton, “Ghost ship – Russia’s Secret Naval Fleet,” *Outlook 1/2023*, NATO Defense College, October 2023, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1879#>.

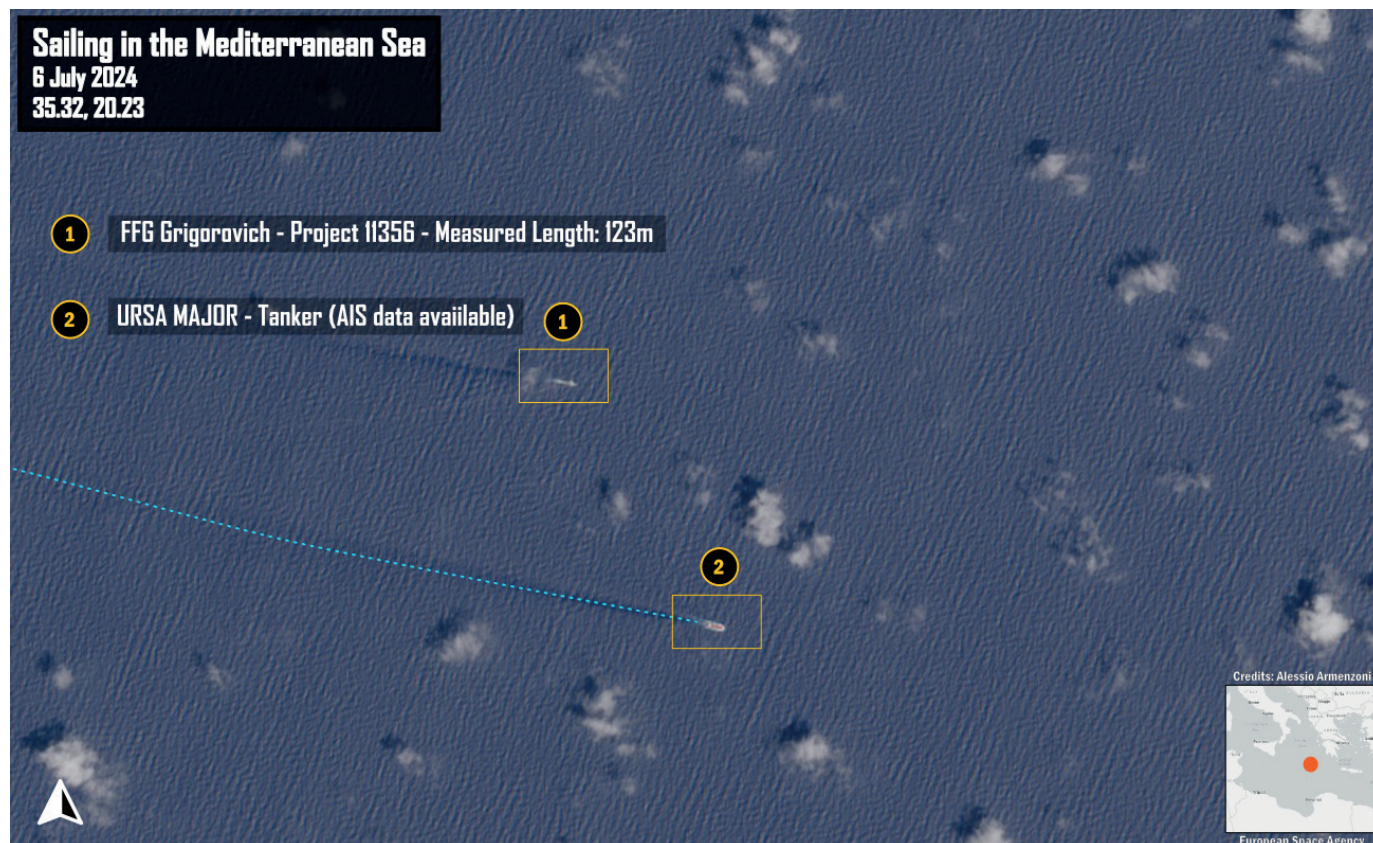


Figure 7. Military Escort – Admiral Grigorovich and Ursa Major North of Libya, 6 July 2024. Sources: AIS data provided by Fishing Vessels Watch, European Space Agency, Authors.

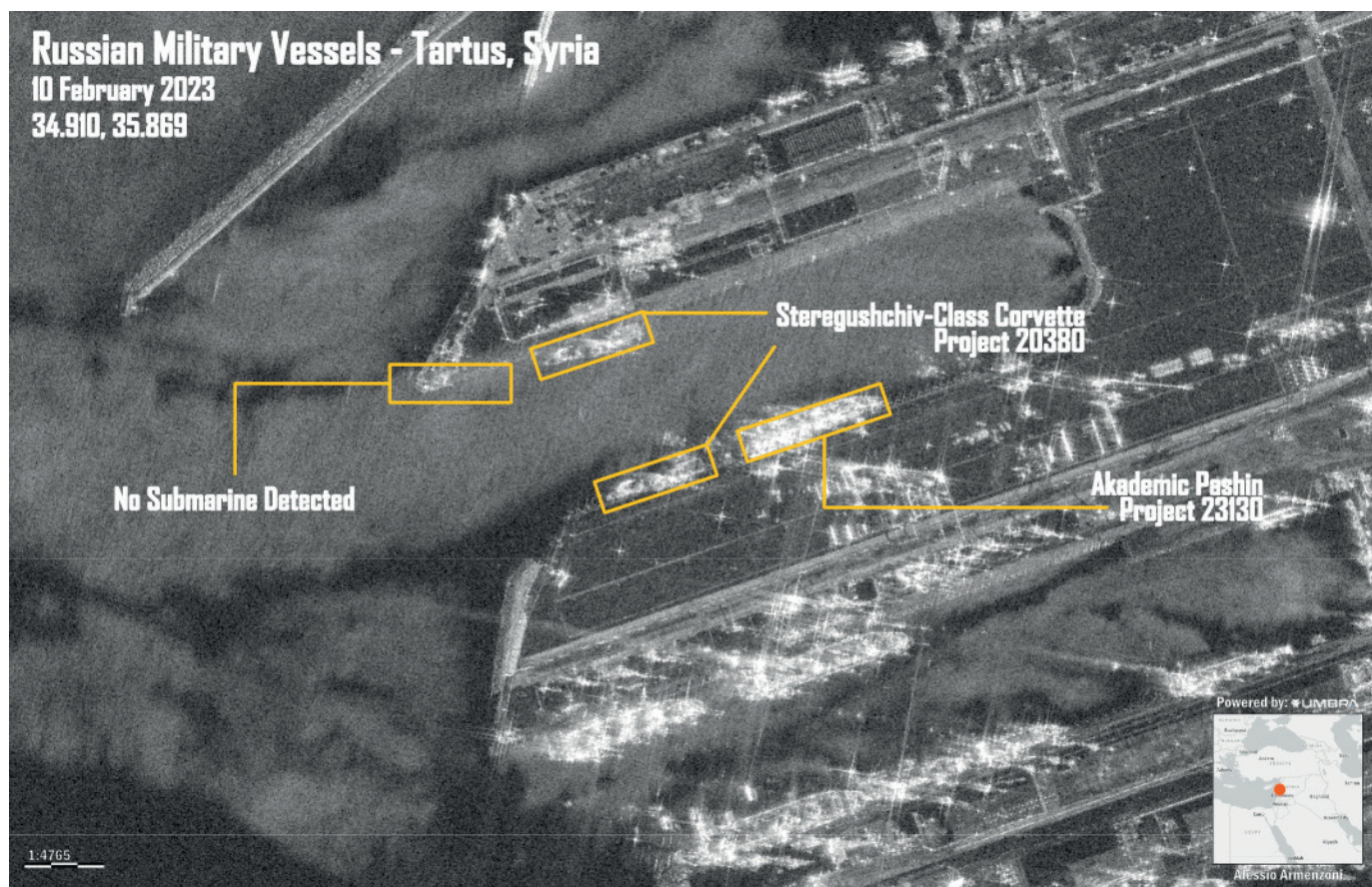


Figure 8. Analysis of Synthetic Aperture Radar acquisition capturing the port of Tartus on 10 February 2023. Sources: SkyFy, Umbra, Authors.

anti-aircraft guns”.⁷⁴ This operation was possibly connected to former deputy defence minister Timur Ivanov, who was investigated for “corruption” and treason, and is now in jail.⁷⁵ In fact, the “Syrian Express” was not able to transit through the Bosphorus possibly because the authorities enforced the Montreux Convention on these specific vessels,⁷⁶ as it prevents military vessels from passing through the strait in case of war.⁷⁷ As a result, the logistics lifeline was rerouted across the Mediterranean Sea, moving between Kaliningrad and Tartus, a much longer route where it is exposed to NATO reconnaissance activities (Figure 6).⁷⁸

An important component of the Squadron’s mission is to provide Russian-flagged cargo vessels transporting oil, weapons and related logistical materials with a military escort (Figure 7).

Other vessels can be identified and connected to the Russian ships active in the region and part of their ordinary operations (Figure 8). One vessel of interest is visible by multi-sensor satellite imagery, including synthetic aperture radar acquisitions and multiband medium-resolution satellite imagery (Figure 8).

Measurement intelligence shows the presence of two vessels whose length and beam coincide with Steregushchiy-class corvettes – which were also reported to follow the Syrian Express (Figure 8).⁷⁹ Docked at the same pier was the Akademik Pashin (IMO: 9778193), a support tanker also present in the flotilla sent to Havana as part of the highly publicized joint drills held in June 2024.⁸⁰ The Akademik Pashin followed the convoy to resupply it at sea.⁸¹

In 2024, Russian military vessel activity has been significant. In May and June 2024, open source assets, including

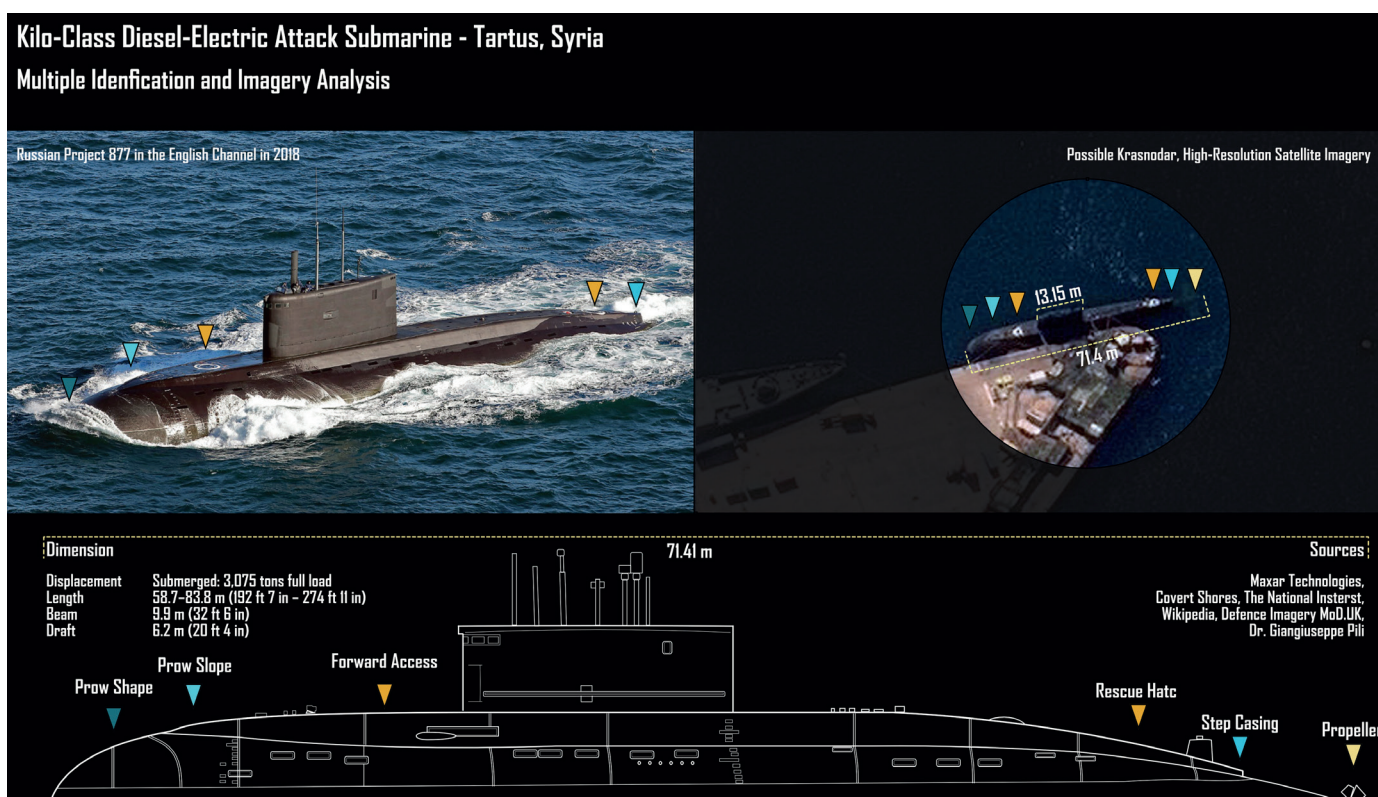


Figure 9. Kilo-class submarine, possibly the B-262 Krasnodar - Analysis. Source: Cesium, Russian MoD, Lelo CaNa Videos, Authors.

74 Alexander Palmer, Delaney Duff, Jennifer Jun and Joseph S. Bermudez, “A Wolf in Ship’s Clothing: Russia’s Militarization of Civilian Vessels in the Black Sea,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 24 August 2023, accessed 18 July 2023.

75 Giangiuseppe Pili, Fabrizio Minniti, “Shoigu’s Removal and the Instability of Putin’s Regime,” Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), 14 May 2024, available at: <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/shoigus-removal-and-instability-putins-regime>.

76 Although this is still a matter of discussion among analysts, for instance, see H I Sutton, “Vital Russian Supply Lines In Black Sea Cut By Ukrainian Drones,” *Naval News*, 10 March 2024, available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/03/vital-russian-supply-lines-in-black-sea-cut-by-ukrainian-drones/>

77 Giangiuseppe Pili, Jack Crawford, Nick Loxton, “Russia Is Violating the Montreux Convention With Civilian Ships,” US Naval Institute, *Proceedings*, Vol. 149/9/1, 447, 2023 available at: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/september/russia-violating-montreux-convention-civilian-ships>.

78 Giangiuseppe Pili, Alessio Armenzoni, “After Close Scrutiny, Russian ‘Ghost Fleet’ Ships May Be Changing Tactics,” *The Maritime Executive*, 14 May 2024, <https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/after-close-scrutiny-russian-ghost-fleet-ships-may-be-changing-tactics>.

79 Fabrizio Minniti, “Sparta IV, Oboronlogistics e la Logistica Strategica Russa nel Mar Nero,” *Difesa Online*, 26 September 2023, available at: <https://www.difesaonline.it/mondo-militare/sparta-iv-oboronlogistics-e-la-logistica-strategica-russa-nel-mar-nero>

80 Joseph Trevithick, “Russian Naval Group Shadowed Off Florida By U.S., Allies (Updated),” *The War Zone*, 11 June 2024, available at: <https://www.twz.com/news-features/russian-naval-group-shadowed-off-florida-by-u-s-allies>.

81 AIS data provided by Global Fishing Watch.

the authors⁷, reported the passage or presence of Russian military and civilian support ships in Syria, Egypt, Libya and throughout the Mediterranean Sea. The GMC Varyag - Slava-class (project 1164)⁸² joined military drills with the Egyptian Navy in the first half of June 2024⁸³ along with the Pacific Fleet's FFG Marshal Shaposhnikov - Udaloy-class (project 11551).⁸⁴ The Pacific Fleet's Varyag entered the Mediterranean Sea from the Suez Canal on 1 April 2024 and then based in Tartus.⁸⁵ Notably, both vessels stationed in Tobruk after the military drills with Egypt's navy. The FFG Admiral Grigorovich came back into the Mediterranean on 10 November 2023, after passing Gibraltar.⁸⁶ Since June 2023, the Admiral Grigorovich has been equipped with a new form of camouflage specifically designed to hinder identification from optical satellite acquisitions.⁸⁷ Other ships were also equipped with the

same camouflage, including the small missile ship Grayavoron (Buyan-M class, Project 21631),⁸⁸ the frigate Admiral Makarov, the Buyan-M-class corvettes Volochyok and Ingushetia, the corvette Muromets, and the minesweeper Ivan Golubets.⁸⁹ The FFC Merkury - Steregushchiy-class corvette (project 20380),⁹⁰ part of the Black Sea Fleet but stationed at Tartus, serves as an escort for the Libyan Express and is probably destined for the so-called "Africa Corps". In April 2024, for example, the Merkury escorted the LST Ivan Gren (project 11711)⁹¹ and LST Aleksandr Otrakovskiy (project 775) to the PMC base in Al Khadim, Libya.⁹²

Other ships tracked were the FFC Orekhovo-Zuyevo - Buyan-M-class (project 21631) and the tanker Kola - Altay-class (IMO: 6720004, project 160). The Admi-

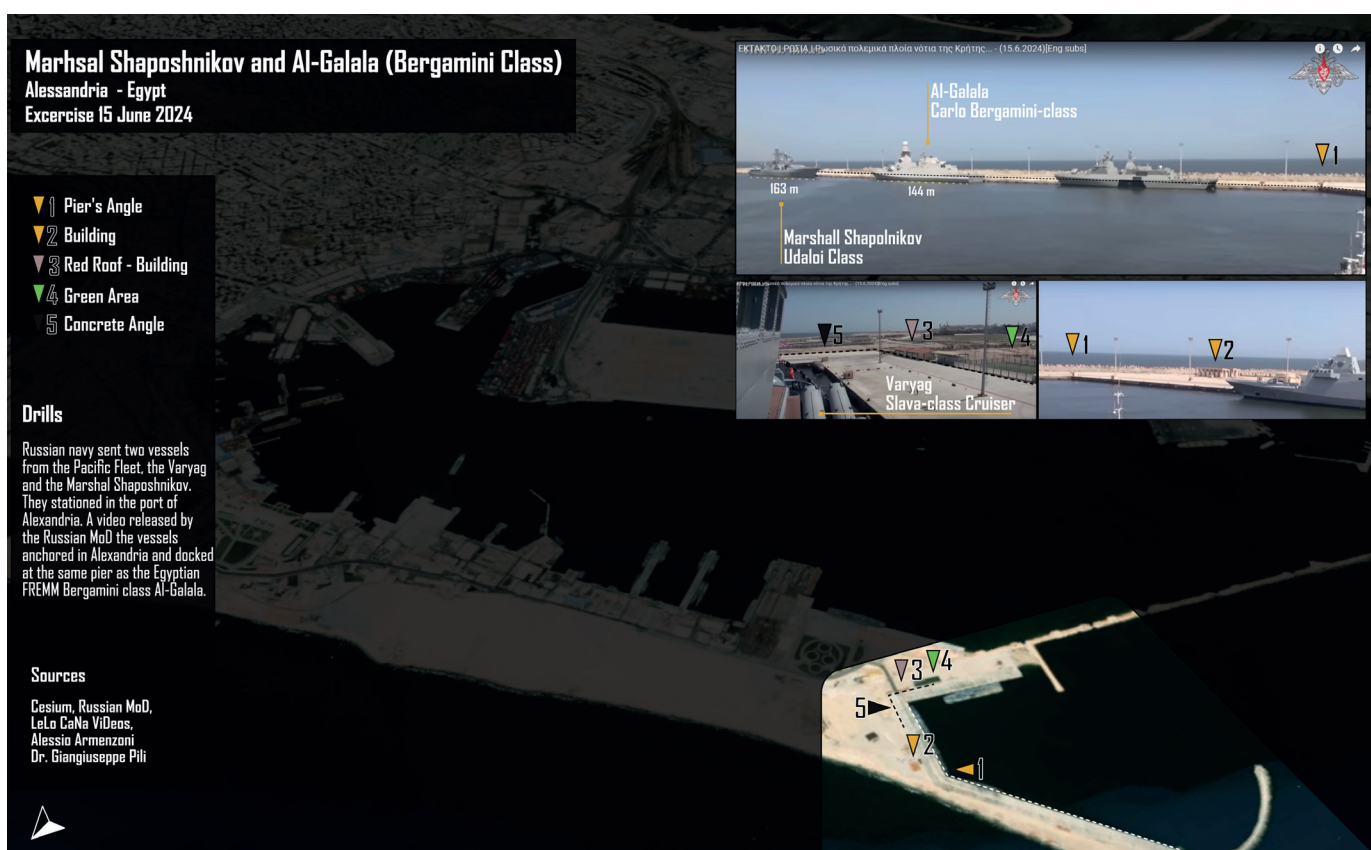


Figure 10. Russian presence in Egypt with the Udaloy-class Marshal Shaposhnikov in the back.

Source: Cesium, Russian MoD, Lelo CaNa Videos, Analyst.

- ⁸² "Guided Missile Cruisers – Project 1164 Atlant," *RussianShips.Info*, 2009-2024, available at: https://russianships.info/eng/warships/project_1164.htm.
- ⁸³ "Russian, Egyptian Warships to Holds Drills, Practice Maneuvering," TASS, 10 June 2024, available at: <https://tass.com/defense/1801737>.
- ⁸⁴ "Large Anti-Submarine Ships, Project 1155 Fregat, Project 11551 Fregat-M," *RussianShips.Info*, 2009-2024, available at: https://russianships.info/eng/warships/project_1155.htm.
- ⁸⁵ "Ракетный крейсер "Варяг" прошел Суэцкий канал и зашел в Средиземное море" (The missile cruiser Varyag passed the Suez Canal and entered the Mediterranean Sea), TASS, 1 April 2024, available at: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/20404917>.
- ⁸⁶ X post, https://x.com/gibdan1/status/1723098249513349263?s=61&t=Q1-GDKZC_H1uNVruEbiFOQ.
- ⁸⁷ H I Sutton, "Russian Navy Attempts To Disguise Its Most Powerful Warship In Black Sea," *Naval News*, 22 June 2023, available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/06/russian-navy-attempts-to-disguise-its-most-powerful-warship-in-black-sea/>.
- ⁸⁸ "Small Missile Ship Project 21631 Buyan-M," *RussianShips.Info*, 2009-2024, available at: https://russianships.info/eng/warships/project_21631.htm.
- ⁸⁹ H I Sutton, "New Technology Sees Through Russian Attempt to Hide Ships from Ukraine," *Naval News*, 12 July 2023, available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/07/new-technology-sees-through-russian-attempt-to-hide-ships-from-ukraine/>.
- ⁹⁰ "Guard Ships Project 20380 Korvet-1, Project 20385," *RussianShips.Info*, 2009-2024, available at: https://russianships.info/eng/warships/project_20380.htm.
- ⁹¹ "Large Landing Ships Project 11711," *RussianShips.Info*, 2009-2024, available at: https://russianships.info/eng/warships/project_11711.htm.
- ⁹² *Army Recognition*, "Russia Navy Ropucha Class Landing Ship Quietly Visits Libya, 19 April 2024, available at: <https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/navy-news/2024/russia-navy-ropucha-class-landing-ship-quietly-visits-libya>.

ral Paromov - Paromov-class (IMO: 9882097, project 03182)⁹³ provides logistical support to Russian shipping along with the Kama – Kaliningradneft-class (project 675), a civilian auxiliary ship. Notable is the presence of the Kildin - Moma-class (project 861M), a Russian electronics intelligence (ELINT)⁹⁴ spy ship and part of the Black Sea Fleet, which left the Mediterranean in mid-May 2024 (its current location is unknown). The Alatau - Ingul-class (project 1452) logistics support tug belonging to the Pacific Fleet arrived in the Mediterranean after transiting the Red Sea on 12 June 2024.⁹⁵

Finally, the General Skobelev (IMO: 9503304),⁹⁶ Ursa Major (IMO: 9538892),⁹⁷ Yaz (IMO: 9735323)⁹⁸ and Ascalon (IMO: 9198226)⁹⁹ are other ships usually associated with or used in support of the Mediterranean Squadron or other military vessels active in the region.

The Russian Navy conducted exercises with an Egyptian counterpart vessel in June 2024.¹⁰⁰ The drill was announced and constituted a minor event, given the pres-

ence of only two Russian ships and one Egyptian vessel. However, the Russian Navy sent two vessels from the Pacific Fleet, the Varyag and the Marshal Shaposhnikov, both stationed in the port of Alexandria. A video released by the Russian MoD showed the Marshal Shaposhnikov anchored in Alexandria and docked at the same pier as the Egyptian FREMM Bergamini-class Al-Galala (Figure 10).¹⁰¹ The Al-Galala is the former Spartaco Schergat, a multi-role frigate whose downgraded version was delivered by Fincantieri to Egypt under a sale contract which the Italian Government obtained in 2020.¹⁰²

The drills might have been conducted in the area where a U.S. reconnaissance Boeing P8-A was spotted flying on 18 June.¹⁰³ This also suggests that the Shaposhnikov and Varyag may have been in the area at the same time. The naval manoeuvres originating from the port were limited to small-scale exercises near the ships' operational range or to official visits, such as those to Libya and Egypt.



Figure 11. A quiet day in the Mediterranean Sea - PB "Magomed Gadzhiev", KRU "Zhdanov" and SKR "Bezzavetny" at "point 52", 1982 (Sollum Anchorage).

Source: Wikipedia.Ru

- ⁹³ "Small Seagoing Tanker Project 03182 Platforma-Arktika," *RussianShips.Info*, 2009-2024, available at: https://russianships.info/eng/support/project_03182.htm.
- ⁹⁴ "Hydrographic Survey Vessels," *RussianShips.Info*, 2009-2024, available at: https://russianships.info/eng/support/project_861.htm
- ⁹⁵ "Russian Pacific Fleet's Alatau rescue tug enters Red Sea," TASS, 12 June 2024, available at: <https://tass.com/world/1802489>.
- ⁹⁶ Giangiuseppe Pili, Alessio Armenzoni, "After Close Scrutiny, Russian 'Ghost Fleet' Ships May Be Changing Tactics," *The Maritime Executive*, 14 May 2024, available at: <https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/after-close-scrutiny-russian-ghost-fleet-ships-may-be-changing-tactics>
- ⁹⁷ Giangiuseppe Pili, Jack Crawford, Nick Loxton, "Russia Is Violating the Montreux Convention with Civilian Ships."
- ⁹⁸ Giangiuseppe Pili, Alessio Armenzoni, Jack Crawford, "Russian Official Linked to 'Ghost Fleet' Has Been Charged With Treason," *The Maritime Executive*, 26 April 2024, <https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/russian-official-linked-to-ghost-fleet-has-been-charged-with-treason>.
- ⁹⁹ "State Department Actions to Promote Accountability and Impose Costs on the Russian Government for Putin's Aggression against Ukraine," *US Department of State 03/2022*, available at: <https://www.state.gov/state-department-actions-to-promote-accountability-and-impose-costs-on-the-russian-government-for-putins-aggression-against-ukraine/>
- ¹⁰⁰ Lelo Ca Na, EKTAKTO | ΡΩΣΙΑ | Ρωσικά πολεμικά πλοία νότια της Κρήτης... - (15.6.2024)[Eng subs], *LeLo CaNa ViDeos*, 15 June 2024, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahLz6L81Hvk>
- ¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* Vessel identified by the authors.
- ¹⁰² Luca Peruzzi, "First Italian-Built FREMM Delivered To Egypt Reaches Alexandria," *Naval News*, 31 December 2020, available at: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/12/first-italian-built-fremm-delivered-to-egypt-reaches-alexandria/>
- ¹⁰³ "Eyes on Russian Ships?," *ItaMilRadar*, 18 June 2024, available at: <https://www.itamilradar.com/2024/06/18/eyes-on-russian-ships/>.

The Russian naval presence – An assessment

The Russian presence shows clear ambitions, but also restraint and limitations. This can be understood by comparing the current capability with the one established in the 1960s and 1970s, the 5th Operational Squadron, which was intended to counterbalance the preeminent NATO presence in the Mediterranean Sea. The Soviet Union's Mediterranean Theatre of Military Operations was divided into three zones and organized into six task forces (OSs).¹⁰⁴ These task forces included a flagship (mainly a Sverdlov-class cruiser, project 68bis, Zhdanov) with escorts, submarines (six to eight), missile-armed surface ships to counter the U.S. aircraft carriers, anti-submarine vessels, amphibious landing ships, and support vessels, each assigned to different operational zones and objectives. The Soviets were able to conduct an exercise with Egypt

and Syria concentrating up to forty vessels between the Gulf of Sollum and Eastern Crete. By the early 1970s, a “daily strength” of 50 or more Russian naval units solely in the Mediterranean was routine, with a peak of 60 surface ships and 25 submarines in October 1973 as a result of the standoff with the United States during the Yom Kippur War. At the time, the Soviet Navy was coordinating with the Black Sea Fleet, with its main centre located in Sevastopol, where the Admiral was based. Such deployments are unthinkable for the current Russian Navy, both in quantity and quality (Figure 11).

The Soviet Squadron transited and anchored in at least eight different known areas at that time:

- Hammamet anchorage (Tunisian coast),¹⁰⁵
- Anchorage north of Sollum in Egypt but close to the Libyan border,¹⁰⁶
- Lemnos anchorage (well-known as a barrage area by the U.S. Navy),¹⁰⁷
- A reported, unspecified “Riviera” anchorage (between Italy and France),

¹⁰⁴ See the excellent: Lyle J. Goldstein, Yuri M. Zhukov, “A Tale of Two Fleets – A Russian Perspective on the 1973 Naval Standoff in the Mediterranean,”

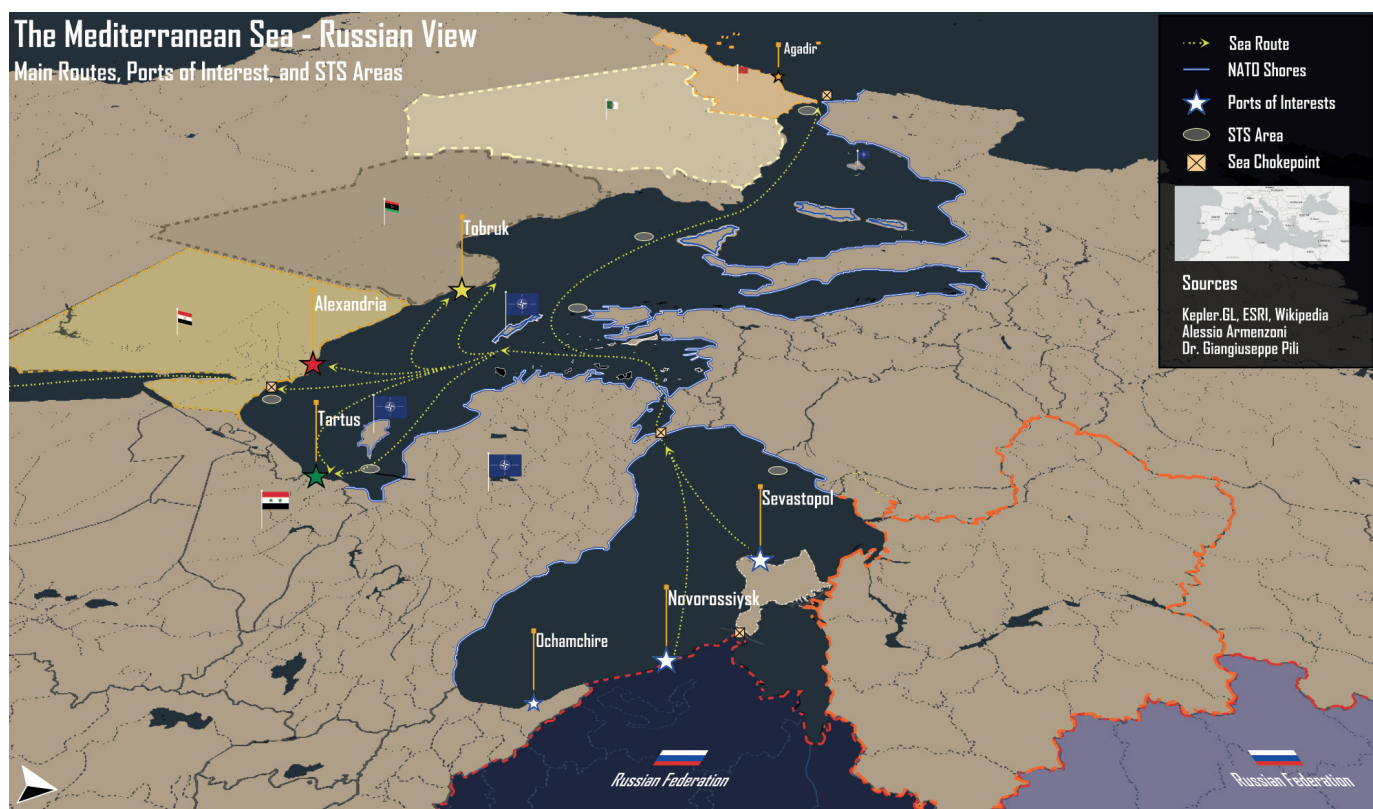


Figure 12. Map of the main Russian routes, areas and transits.
Source: Kepler.GL, ESRI, Authors.

Naval War College Review, Vol. 57, 2004, No. 2, Art. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Approximately around the coordinates 36.083333, 10.75, which is a place of relative peaceful waters with relatively low currents (see Earth NullSchool Ocean Currents Map). The anchorage is not far from several support facilities. For more information on Cold War times, see Gordon H. McCormick, “The Soviet Presence in the Mediterranean,” RAND, October 1987, available at: <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2008/P7388.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ Approximately around the coordinates 31.677677049961417, 25.407547288855124

¹⁰⁷ So described in 194X: “2. Capo Santos-Lemnos-Tenedos, 62 miles: Maximum depth of water, 600 fathoms; mines required, 12,240 present type, 10,800 special type; enemy answer, occupation of Akte Peninsula will permit clearing a channel near Cape Santo or enemy may shift base to Smyrna.” In Edwin Denby, “The American Naval Planning Section London,” Navy Department, Office of Naval Intelligence, Historical Section, Washington, *Publication n. 7*, p. 248.

- Alboran Island anchorage, where the Soviet fishing boats operated (which apparently led Russia to request the island itself from the Spanish Government),¹⁰⁸
- Kithira anchorage (possibly used especially by Black Sea vessels),¹⁰⁹
- Eastern Crete anchorage, and
- Northeast Cyprus anchorage.¹¹⁰

When examining these routes, areas and actual transits (Figure 12), a pattern can be seen, which is mainly the use of safe spots and free movement to and from the Black Sea.

The current Russian Navy seems to be much more constrained and more limited in terms of the number and capability of its vessels, especially in comparison with the numerous NATO forces and the Sixth Fleet of the U.S. Navy. Interestingly, both the Soviet Squadron and the 5th Mediterranean Squadron seem to have been borne out of the same priorities and necessities. First, Russia must establish a sea lifeline between the Black Sea and the main sea routes around the world. Second, it needs to connect logistical hubs of Russian influence in North Africa and the Middle East, where the Soviet presence was historically constant – albeit not very stable – and kept alive after the fall of the Soviet Union to this day.¹¹¹ Moreover, they follow a similar organizational structure, which seeks to avoid the explicit creation of a stable fleet to be maintained in the region. As we saw, ships are continuously rotated and other vessels are brought from the Northern Fleet, Baltic Fleet, Black Sea Fleet, and even the Pacific Fleet when needed.

Considering its numbers and capability, the current Russian Squadron cannot be intended to face a sea battle against any NATO navy; on the contrary, it is intended to be weak enough not to be perceived as a major military threat. For instance, the negligible presence of the best military vessels, such as the Kirov-class battlecruisers, and the inability to deploy any aircraft carriers¹¹² significantly limit Russia's military power projection. In this regard, only the aircraft carrier of the Sixth Fleet Battle Force moves more than 65 aircraft of several types. Those alone create an imbalance of forces considering that there are essentially no Russian air forces beyond airbases sparsely located in the Middle East and North Africa. This assessment does not even consider the specific weight of the rest of NATO presence in the region including NATO air bases, air defence systems, and related capability.

While Russians never favoured major aircraft carriers and preferred to focus on developing anti-aircraft

carrier weapons and vessels (such as the sunk Moskva), similar limitations can be found in the submarine presence. There is no recognized stable transit of first-class nuclear-powered Ballistic Missile Submarines (SSBNs). Of course, SSBNs are intended to pass undetected, stay in areas, and are sometimes spotted, but there are reasons to believe that they have limited use in the area in comparison with the Northern Fleet and the Pacific Fleet.¹¹³ Diesel-powered submarines are known to transit and maintain a presence in the eastern Mediterranean, and they are operational across the region, 'a natural area for the diesel submarine' for logistical reasons, in addition to their low noise profile, which makes them difficult to detect.¹¹⁴ The submarine threat could be assessed as both real and constrained, far from what it was during Soviet times.

Precisely because any military activity is the result of, and is aimed to support, a political goal, the Mediterranean Squadron must be viewed within the context of its overall political objective in the region – mainly to secure Russian interests in a crucial region without stepping too far and provoking significant NATO forces into a direct confrontation. As it stands, the Mediterranean Squadron is effectively able to support Russian military personnel, sea routes, military logistics operations and exercises with other navies, which is likely what it is intended to do. Moreover, it is also battle-tested, through assisting Syrian forces against rebels and jihadists in littoral operations. In conclusion, its presence is as good as it can be to achieve Russia's political aims, and with a relatively limited economic investment compared to the Soviet Eskadra, the Russian Mediterranean Squadron is achieving quite a significant result: upholding Russian interests and connections beyond the Mediterranean Sea. After the fall of Bashar-Al Assad's regime, and with the dictator in Moscow, Russia faces a dilemma: defend its Syrian footholds (Tartus and Latakia air base) or leave the Syrian outpost possibly for Tobruk, Libya. If Russia wants to hold a foot in the Mediterranean Sea, they will need a port for logistics and maintenance. Early talks in late November 2024 could possibly hint that they are considering this option.¹¹⁵ Now Syria is divided between multiple forces. Ex Syrian Arab Army (SAA) is the Government's military force, and its current status is unclear. The Turkish-backed Syrian militias called the Syrian National Army (SNA) is mainly present in the north. The rebels who swept the country were led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Islamist alliance. Unidentified Oppositions Groups are reported by the Institute for the Study of War. Iran-backed Hezbollah massively left the region to join the fight against Israel in Lebanon, which also helped the fall of the Assad regime. US troops are

¹⁰⁸ See Joseph S. Roucek, "Las Implicaciones De La Expansión Naval Soviética en el Mediterráneo," *Revista de Estudios Políticos* n. 169, 1970, p. 129. ISSN 0048-7694. The anchorage is around the coordinates 35.939444, -3.035278.

¹⁰⁹ See Lee Stokes, "Soviet Sea Power in the Mediterranean: Up Anchor?," *The Monitor*, 31 March 1983, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1983/0331/033154.html>.

¹¹⁰ Michael Holm, "5th Operational Squadron," WW2.DK, 1997-2023, <https://www.ww2.dk/new/navy/5opesec.htm>.

¹¹¹ For the (in)stability of the Russian vessels and interests in the Mediterranean Sea, the outstanding Lyle J. Goldstein, Yuri M. Zhukov, "A Tale of Two Fleets".

¹¹² David Axe, "Russia Is No Longer An Aircraft Carrier Nation," *The Telegraph*, 7 June 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/06/07/russia-aircraft-carrier-kuznetsov-navy-jets-mig-29/>.

¹¹³ H I Sutton, "New Intelligence: Russia Sends Nuclear Submarine To Mediterranean," *Naval News*, 2 September 2022, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/09/new-intelligence-russia-sends-nuclear-submarine-to-mediterranean/>.

¹¹⁴ See Bruce W. Watson, Susan M. Watson, Calland Carnes, Brian Larson (eds), *The Soviet Navy Strengths and Liabilities* (London, 1986, Routledge).

¹¹⁵ Safaal Harathy, 'Haftar meets Russian deputy defence minister in Benghazi', *Libyan Observer*, 27 November 2024, available at: <https://libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/haftar-meets-russian-deputy-defence-minister-benghazi>

stationed in the south of the country. If Russia remains, it will have to deal with the uncertain situation of the region not counting on a friendly regime.

There are several possible options for Russia when considering the fluid situation in Syria. Apparently, the recent developments seem to suggest a positive reply, as Russia can try to use the old Syrian agreement as a tool of legitimization of the new government.¹¹⁶ In fact, the Mediterranean Squadron did not leave the area close to the port of Tartus.¹¹⁷ It is highly probable that Russia can hold Tartus if they regroup all the forces left there. The question is at what cost and clearly other options to regroup the Squadron in another North African country are considered.¹¹⁸

Russian oil at sea - The shadow fleet

The picture depicted so far is focused on the Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea. As we have seen, Russian military personnel and economic interests span beyond Libya and Syria as they are trying to maintain a stable foothold both in North Africa and in the Middle East. However, to fully appreciate the extent of Russian operations in the region, focusing solely on the naval presence and “Africa Corps” would be misleading. In fact, there was no battle of Kursk in the Mediterranean Sea in the history of the Soviet Union and now Russia, and there is, to our knowledge, no hunt for Red October today. But military forces are quite limited without oil, diesel submarines cannot go beneath the sea without it, and there is no industrialized country without a petrochemical industry. Indeed, there is no Russian economy without revenue from crude and refined oil. Without the ability to sell the 11% of world oil production on the global oil market, and without the so-called *shadow fleet*, the war in Ukraine would simply stop abruptly. The Russian state is kept alive in the Mediterranean Sea and other critical worldwide locations where millions of barrels of oil worth trillions of dollars have been moved via ship-to-ship (STS) transfers since March 2022.¹¹⁹ The entire operation is too complex to be fully explored in this analysis, as it goes far beyond the Mediterranean Sea and Russian operations in the region, but Russia’s power projection and geopolitical influence are oil-based and, as a result, this component cannot be ignored.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Western sanctions have targeted Russian oil exports, capping the price at USD 60 per barrel. Despite this, Russia has continued to generate revenue, thanks in part to a shadow fleet of ageing tankers. These vessels, many over 15 years old, engage in risky ship-to-ship transfers, often with AIS transceivers turned off to avoid detection, thereby violating international regulations. The shadow fleet, estimated at 400 to 1,200 tankers, represents about 20% of the world’s tanker fleet. According to a Windward analysis, “the total amount of Russian crude and oil products carried by both the dark and gray fleets since the [Ukraine] war began is +142 million barrels per day. With an annual average price of USD 77 per barrel of crude oil in 2023, the crude oil carried by these fleets is worth more than approximately USD 6 billion, assuming they circumvented the USD 60 price cap.”¹²⁰ This oil is largely destined for China and India. However, third countries’ refined oil is shipped back to the West.¹²¹ This oil often re-enters Western markets under different labels, circumventing sanctions.

Key transshipment hubs in the Mediterranean include Ceuta (near Spain) and Hurd’s Bank (near Malta), with previously seen activity in the Laconian Gulf (near Greece). These operations carry significant environmental risks, highlighted by incidents such as a tanker explosion. Despite the potential ecological dangers, the enforcement of sanctions is complicated. Stricter measures could provoke Russia, risking further escalation as the Kremlin relies heavily on these revenues for state security and regime stability. NATO’s restraint reflects a delicate balance, avoiding actions that could be perceived as acts of war by Russia.

Considerations for NATO

Overall, Russia’s involvement across the Mediterranean reflects its broader strategy of leveraging regional alliances and opportunism to maintain influence, safeguard its interests, and remain a significant geopolitical player. Yet, the current Russian Navy lacks the same level of quantity and quality in its deployments from the height of the Cold War, showing a marked decline in its operational capacity. As the relatively weaker power challenging the status quo, Russia’s policymakers are likely to continue to seek leverage through unconventional means.¹²² Like many countries that challenge NATO’s posture, Russia employs “plausible deniability” to disguise its actions.¹²³

¹¹⁶ Donato Paolo Mancini, ‘Russia Nears Deal With New Syria Leaders to Keep Army Bases’, Bloomberg, December 2024, available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-12-12/russia-nears-deal-with-new-syria-leaders-to-keep-military-bases?sref=cus85deZ>

¹¹⁷ AT Anderson on X, 11 December 2024, available at: https://x.com/MT_Anderson/status/1867279634460479825

¹¹⁸ Abdulrahman Mansour, ‘After China, Russia calls on its citizens to leave Syria immediately’, Egyptian Telegraph, 6 December 2024, <https://www.egypttelegraph.com/article/98144> (AI generated translation).

¹¹⁹ See Alessio Armenzoni, Giangiuseppe Pili, Gary C. Kessler, “Red Flags: Russian Oil Tradecraft In the Mediterranean Sea,” U.S. Naval Institute, June 2024, *Proceedings*, Vol. 150/6/1,456, available at: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/june/red-flags-russian-oil-tradecraft-mediterranean-sea>.

¹²⁰ “Illuminating Russia’s Shadow Fleet,” Windward, updated April 2024, <https://windward.ai/knowledge-base/illuminating-russias-shadow-fleet/>

¹²¹ Michael Race, “Russian Oil Getting Into UK Via Refinery Loophole, Reports Claim,” BBC, 5 February 2024, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-68018660>

¹²² Diane M. Zorri, “Great Power Competition and The Gray Zone,” in Howard G. Coombs and Christopher Marsh (eds), *Operating in the Margins: SOF in the Gray Zone*, 2023, p.11 – 23.

¹²³ Kyle Atwell, Joshua M. Portzer and Daphne McCurdy, “Negotiating [Im] plausible Deniability,” *Prism*, Vol. 9, No. 2, p. 113-121.

By prioritizing technological adaptability, NATO could more proactively counter Russia's approach, and yet also respond in a manner that does not necessarily escalate tensions or provoke a wider conflict.¹²⁴ To do this, at the strategic level, NATO members could offer more consistent engagement with North African and Middle Eastern countries through Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes (ITPP).¹²⁵ This engagement could include joint maritime patrols, information sharing, implementing standardized electronic reporting requirements, technology-based capacity-building, as well as education and training focused on countering smuggling operations and ghost fleets.

At the operational level, NATO members could improve their coordination efforts on technology integration to monitor and track the flow of Russian oil. For instance, real-time intelligence-sharing through mechanisms developed via ITTPs could help identify and intercept illicit shipments. Furthermore, a current or newly established Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) could add the

additional task of disrupting smuggling operations and addressing the operations of ghost fleets.

From the tactical perspective, NATO could prioritize implementing advanced satellite surveillance and integrating blockchain technology for tracking oil shipments.¹²⁶ The CMP could also collaborate with international maritime organizations to de-register vessels involved in smuggling and prevent them from re-entering the global shipping registry under different identities.

While navigating its limitations in the Mediterranean, the Russian Navy seeks to reconcile its historical maritime dominance with the current reality necessitating its asymmetrical approach. Concurrently, Russia's expansionary efforts are prompting NATO policymakers to realign planning frameworks, priorities, and defence capabilities in parallel with the orientation towards "great power competition". Ultimately, by embracing collaboration and technological innovation, NATO can respond to Russia's challenge in this domain.

124 Ondrej Ditrych, "Four Swans Of the Black Sea – Security Scenarios for a Contested Region," *Brief 13*, 18 July 2024, EUISS, available at: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/four-swans-black-sea> [accessed 31 July 2024]; *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, 29 June 2022, available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf [accessed 31 July 2024].

125 "Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes," NATO, 25 April 2024, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_225037.htm [accessed 29 July 2024].

126 Javed Aslam, Aqeela Saleem, Nokhaiz Tariq Khan and Yun Bae Kim, "Blockchain Technology for Oil and Gas: Implications and Adoption Framework Using Agile and Lean Supply Chains," *Processes*, Vol. 10, No. 12, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3390/pr10122687>; Raja Wasim Ahmad, Khaled Salah, Raja Jayaraman, Ibrar Yaqoob, Mohammed Omar, "Blockchain In Oil and Gas Industry: Applications, Challenges, and Future Trends," *Technology in Society*, Elsevier, Vol. 68(C).

Research Division

NATO Defense College
Via Giorgio Pelosi 1
00143 Rome – Italy

www.ndc.nato.int

Follow us on
Twitter (@NATO_DefCollege)
Facebook (NATODefenseCollege)
LinkedIn (@nato-defense-college)

The views expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NATO Defense College, NATO, or any government or institution represented by the contributors.

The NATO Defense College applies the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

