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Security Considerations in the Mediterranean and the Middle East:

A Russian Perspective

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The Mediterranean and the Middle East are traditionally in focus of the Russian public opinion. It was evident during the epoch of tsars and the period of communist regime. The eminent Russian men of letters of the XIX Century - Lev Tolstoy, Fedor Dostoevsky, Fedor Tutchev as well as those of XX Century - Maxim Gorky, Alexei Tolstoy, Valentin Kataev devoted the brilliant pages of their works to this problem. The same emotional perception of all what is happening in this area exists to day too. One of the reason for such attention is that the situation in the Mediterranean and the Middle East has an enormous influence on all dimensions of the Russian security.

It is evident that the global security of Russia is linked with the security of the adjacent regions of Europe and Asia but the Mediterranean and the Black Sea space play a special role. It is a part of the so called “arch of vulnerability” from Gibraltar through Black Sea and the Middle East up to India and China. Stormy events and conflicts, enormous armament potential and oversupply of weapons (the Mediterranean is one of the regions with highest concentration of naval forces) in this area became dangerous challenges for European security and for Russia too.

Analizing the geo-strategic dimension of the Mediterranean - Middle East - Black Sea Region one can say that it was always a negative factor for an effective military defence. Enemies of Russia were using during centuries the geographical configuration of this area. It is correct for all periods of Russian history.

Today the Russian military officials believe that the immediate threat to unleash a “big” war doesn’t exist today, but the military menace remains. Hypothetically holding the Mediterranean as the base for aggression, the potential Russian enemy can

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isolate Russian South by closing the Black Sea Straits. Entering the Black Sea waters, he is able to begin an offensive towards the Central Russia. The possible missile attack against Russian territory by the naval forces and from land bases in the Mediterranean can't be excluded too.

As to Russia, it couldn't answer today to military challenges by effective manner. Russian army appears to be in period of reformation. The combat potential of the Black Sea Fleet which in the past was a powerful instrument of Soviet foreign policy on the southern borders of the country is weakened. By some assessments, 60 % of the Russian Black Sea Fleet are older than 15 and more years.¹ The process of implementation of agreement between the Russian Federation and Ukraine signed on the 31 May 1997 remains a difficult issue in relations between two countries. After some months they believe that problem of the Black Sea Fleet is not resolved.²

Besides all geo-strategic aspects of present situation the security of Russia depends also on some geopolitical factors. Russia traditionally takes into account a complicated structure of regional international relations, the peculiarity of historical development of the region, the controversies between different groups of Mediterranean nations.

After the collapse of the USSR it became evident that Russia was not able to continue to play the same role in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, which the Soviet Union had been playing. Nowadays the presence and political influence of Russia in the region are being reduced to minimal level as well as Russian participation in the process of decision-making regarding the Mediterranean - Middle East - Black Sea problems. At the same time the activity of the USA and West European countries in the Region is growing.

The security on Russian southern borders is undermined by such a geopolitical factor as conflicts and confrontations. Among them is the situation in the Balkans.

¹ "Nezavisimaj Gazeta" 5 May 1997

² See: "Bezopasnost Rossii. Chernomorski Region" ("Russian security. The Black Sea Region") M. 1997 pp. 25-44; "Nezavisimaj Gazeta" 6 August 1997

Given the role which the Balkans played in Russian history, the conflict on the territory of former Yugoslavia attracts special attention of Russian public opinion. The idea that Russia has its own interests in the Balkans is common for almost all trends of Russian public life. All what is happening in the Balkans is a substantial factor for the Russian domestic policy and for the political life inside the country.

The perception of necessity to maintain good-neighbor relations with all Balkan countries increased specially at the end of the 20th century. The geopolitical factor influences the Russian line for the stability in the Balkans. As far as the Balkans are near to the Russian territory, it determines permanent Russian intention to support constructive processes in the Balkan countries. It can be said that the line of Russian diplomacy consists there of efforts to influence the general situation by maintaining traditional contacts with the Serbs, preserving good relations with the Muslims and Croats, cooperating and interacting with the Western powers. "It's impossible to replace Russia in the life of Jugoslavia - was declared by first deputy of Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov - our relations will be preserved in long - term meaning on very high level".³

The Middle East is for a long period a region of Russian interest. Now Russia is one of two cosponsors of the Middle East peace process. This reason as well as the economic necessities, as Evgeni Primakov, Russian Foreign Minister, believes, are the impetus to develop here a Russian diplomatic activities.⁴

Moscow wants to maintain its role in the Middle East. The leaders of Lebanon, Israel, Palestine were received in the Kremlin in 1997. The recent visit of E.Primakov in Middle East countries was considered as a productive contribution in the peace process. One can say that Russian official line is to have constructive relations with all sides of the peace process, with all countries of this huge region.

³ "Nezavisimaj Gazeta" 5 February 1997

⁴ "Segodnya" 5 November 1996

Russia is interested also to ease tension between Greece and Turkey over territory in the Aegean; this confrontation creates direct threat to security of the Black Sea area and to the navigation through the Straits.

For the same reasons it is important for Russia that the Cyprus problem will be resolved as soon as possible. The Russian Foreign Ministry declared that “actual status quo is intolerable” and called for demilitarization of the island.

As to the signing of the contract of the purchase of Russia surface-to-air missiles C-300 the Russian position is that cooperation between Moscow and Nicosia in defense matter is a bilateral act that doesn't concern third parties, and that the sale of Russian arms did not violate international law, nor does it put back into question the balance of forces.⁵ It seems that new possibilities may appear if some progress will be evident in the process of normalization of situation on Island.

For better understanding the Russian Mediterranean policy it is good to keep in mind that the Russian tradition is to consider the Mediterranean and Black Sea Region as a single space. Today new geopolitical elements of the Black Sea area are of large influence on Russian security system. Russia is witnessing an overhaul of the geopolitical environment in the Black Sea region distinctly marked by an expanded number of international subjects in the area. The Black Sea geo-political situation is a combination of more than a dozen nations and international organizations. Their multifaceted relations are incomparable to those of the Soviet era and Cold war.

Conflicts and crises in the Black Sea are serious challenges to Russia, especially to its internal policy. It became evident particularly in the course of violent clashes and conflicts on the Caucasus provoked by ethnic aggravations, increasing nationalism and secessionism (separatism). The situation in Ossetia, Abkhasia, Nagorno Karabakh has not been settled down so far, even though Russian peace-making and mediatory efforts undertaken with the UN and OSCE produced some results. The situation in Chechnya appears to be especially complex.

⁵ Agence Europe 9 January 1997, “Nezavisimaj Gazeta” 18 January 1997

Other big group of factors determining the role of Russia and its security policy in the Mediterranean-Black Sea region is inseparable from developing economic and social processes.

Many Russian internal regions maintain effective economic contacts with the Mediterranean and Black Sea countries. The South of Russia (Krasnodar and Stavropol Territories, Rostov-on-Don Region), which play a big role in national life as a breadbasket, transit communications and recreational area, has developed economic and trade relations with countries of this region.⁶ There are direct economic regional accords with Romania, Bulgaria, Greece. The Central Russia, the Volga Region, the Ural and Siberia cooperate closely with the areas adjacent to the basins of the Black Sea and Azov Sea, even those that have become part of Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia, with many Mediterranean countries.

The Mediterranean and Black Sea has always been a gateway to the World Ocean for Russia. The Black Sea routes and Straits accommodate about 25 percent of Russian foreign trade. The Mediterranean countries are Russian traditional trade and economic partners. Unfortunately, 1990s have seen the weakening of economic ties especially with the South-Mediterranean subregion.⁷ Merchant maritime routes will be gaining importance in the future decades when Russian economy gets stronger, its foreign trade diversifies and it branches out to new markets.

The factors which provide the global security for Russia in the Mediterranean and Black Sea Region have also some social aspects. Social stability can be considered as necessary precondition for the creation of a really effective security system. The Euromediterranean efforts to control such social problems as consequences of the economic gap between two shores of the Mediterranean Sea, the demographic situation and migration provoke the interest of Russian scholars and practitioners as a matter of positive experience.

⁶ "The South of Russia" in "International Affairs", Moscow, N10 1994 pp. 64-157

⁷ Boris M.Pichugin "Russia's trade with the Mediterranean countries" in "Russia: The Mediterranean and Black Sea Region", M. 1996. pp. 108-114

As to the Black Sea zone its high level of social tension is a permanent challenge to the Russian security. The problem of refugees and forced migrants is clearly extraordinary in this context. As a large portion of refugees is socially marginal, it is fairly susceptible to extremist idea of any sort. The inevitable tumult and disorder in conflicts become a fertile breeding ground for organized crime and drug-dealer rings. There is a very real and confirmed danger of turning the area lying at the cross-roads of merchant routes from Asia to Europe into haven for international drug traffickers.

For better perception of Russian approach to the problem of Mediterranean security one has to emphasize that the history of the Mediterranean and Black Sea space rendered the substantial impact on the shaping of Russian national identity. Religions and cultural ties played a big role. Christianity came to Russia from the Eastern Mediterranean through the Balkans and the Black Sea lands. The battles in the Mediterranean against Napoleon I and Ottoman Empire, the Crimean War in the XIX c. and its results contributed to the evolution of the Russian national idea. The traditional view of Russians was that of liberator in the Black Sea region and the nearby Balkans.

During a certain period after the collapse of the USSR a belief sincere friendship with the West dominated over Russian society. The public opinion was waiting for dissolution of the NATO after the end of the Warsaw Treaty Organization. The first steps of the West appeared to be more or less encouraging. While the NATO continued to exist, nonetheless the NATO's leaders announced that the NATO was reviewing its strategy and would rely on political actions henceforth. But soon the inexorable laws of geo-politics began to work. The result was that the NATO tried to fill the vacuum which sprung up after disappearance of the Soviet Union, in particular in the Mediterranean and Black Sea space.

The increase in the military activity of the NATO in the Mediterranean Region became a distinctive feature of the new situation. An analysis, for example, of the NATO's activity in 90s in the Balkans revealed that it continued to rely on the threat and use of force. This was seen when NATO joined the hostilities on the side of one of

the parties. NATO military leaders have been consistently advocating the right to independently take decisions on delivering bomb strikes, clearly expecting the UN to provide a cover of respectability to their actions.

The Dayton agreements created only basis for a long-term peace-building process. But for being really effective their application has to be achieved not by the violence but by elastic political methods without preferences and discriminations.

The continuing presence of the US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean provoke the same kind of concern. The question is, what is the aim of its continued activity there, if the enemy against which it had been deployed is no longer there? Is it designed to symbolize the US might in the region, putting pressure on South European, African and Middle Eastern countries? But this can not help reduce tensions in the region, if normal and effective political methods will not be used.

Besides, NATO is establishing itself very actively in the Black Sea, which has always been the priority zone of Russian interests. NATO's instrument of this policy is the program known as Partnership for Peace, which all Black Sea countries have joined.

In the new situation developing in the region as a result of the conclusion of relevant accords, NATO's southern flank is shifting northward, which means that the Black Sea became one of its components.

Never before did the NATO countries warships sail the waters of the Black Sea so often as today. Let us to compare: in 1990 7 navals of non-coastal countries visited Black Sea ports, 29 in 1996.⁸ It has become a regular NATO practice to hold joint exercises in the area, which the Russian military regard with a measure of worriness. By the way, Russia refused to take part in the last years naval exercises in the Black Sea, held under the Partnership for Peace program.

⁸ "Nezavisimaj Gazeta" 18 January 1997

This increasing activity of NATO is matter of discontent of Moscow. President Boris Yeltsin declared that Russia would react hard on all efforts “to transform the Black Sea into jumping-off place for the fleets of NATO and non-Black Sea countries”. The exercise “See Breeze” in august 1997 provoked a stormy reaction in Russia.

The biggest danger for aggravation of relations between the West and Russia are the plans of NATO’s enlargement towards the East.

If NATO accepts as its members not only Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic but also Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Ukraine and Moldova, as it was announced in the Resolution of the US Congress in July 1996, Russia will be turned out face to face with a single military bloc from the Baltic Sea up to the Mediterranean.⁹ The visit of Mr. J.Solana to Caucasian and Central Asia republics in March 1997 was considered as a pressure on Russia.¹⁰

In this context the recent NATO’s efforts to expand its influence in the Mediterranean acquire a special meaning.

The course for strengthening military cooperation between the NATO and the West European Union has to be mentioned too. In May 1994 the WEU admitted Romania and Bulgaria as associated partners.

Thus, the Russian public opinion, which got used to viewing NATO through the characteristics of the Cold War period, has some reasons to be concerned. Naturally the situation can be improved if NATO will establish truly partnership with Russia and will take into account not only its own interests but the security concerns of Russia too. Russia insists, Mr. Igor Sergeev, Russian Defense Minister, said on the equal dialogue between RF and NATO, on the limitation and Reduction of NATO’s military activity.¹¹

⁹ “Isvestia” 25 July 1996

¹⁰ “Nezavisimaj Gazeta” 7 March 1997

¹¹ “Nezavisimaj Gazeta” 20 January 1998

It seems that effective application of the “Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between the NATO and the Russian Federation”, signed in Paris on May 27, could reduce a tension between the two sides, especially if, as Mr. J.Solana said, would be realized the common goal to overcome the vestiges of past confrontation and competition.¹²

The significant role plays an other active subject of regional multilateral relations - the European Union.

Obviously its biggest achievement in this area is the Conference in Barcelona in November 1995, when the new so called Euro-Mediterranean Partnership process was launched. But two big countries, which have security and economic interests in the Mediterranean - the USA and Russia - were not invited to attend the conference and hence they are not members of the Euromediterranean cooperation system.

Regarding the USA one can say that this non-participation can not have serious consequences for American economic interests, because the US economic presence as well as political one in the Mediterranean have sufficient and solid roots.

For Russia consequences can be much more negative given its actual economic crisis and general weakness of its position in the area. The impression is that this absence of invitation to the Euromediterranean cooperation means the intention to isolate Russia from regional activity. For various reasons some North-Mediterranean countries do not want to see Russia participating in this system.

The analysis of documents of the Barcelona and Malta conferences provokes an important question: will the Euromediterranean cooperation be a closed structure, where the entrance is forbidden for non-coastal countries and non-members of the EC? It is an opportunity to remark to this point that another regional structure - The Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) - is open for participation of interested countries and includes some Mediterranean countries.

¹² “NATO Review” N3 May-June 1997, p. 3

Why among all European countries will the EU members have special privileges in the region? The politics of discrimination regarding other continental countries will not help to resolve the difficult problems of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Russia, which has its own traditional interests in the region and being linked with the Mediterranean basin through the Black Sea, insists on the right to contribute when the problems of the region are discussed.

There are some reasons which provoke negative reaction of Russia on so dangerous challenge as the radical Islamism in the Mediterranean area. First of all, it prevents normal economic activity of Russian business circles, commercial companies and other economic organizations in the region, for example, in Algeria.

The Mediterranean Islamic radicalism exercise ideological and psychological influence on Islamic community in Russia and Muslim population of Central Asia, Caucasus, Crimea.

And, lastly, the Mediterranean Islamic radicals are an active element of the arch from Afghanistan up to the Atlantic Ocean of those Islamic forces which for different reasons consider themselves as enemies of Russia.

It must be said that in Russia there are different approaches to the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism. While one part of experts condemn totally the fundamentalism, another part believes that such approach would be not correct because the Islamic fundamentalism consists of several trends and it would be wiser to find a compromise with the forces of moderate fundamentalism.

What can be done? It is obvious that the strengthening of regional security - including those of Russia - is based on the process of development and improvement of bilateral and multilateral relations.

To enhance the quality of political interaction with all Mediterranean - Black Sea nations for ensuring stable regional security and stability would be of great importance for the foreign policy of Russia. The Mediterranean problems can be

discussed in the frameworks of treaties and agreements concluded by Russia with all the North-Mediterranean countries - with France in 1992, Turkey - in 1992, Greece - in 1993, Spain - in 1994, Italy - in 1994, Portugal - in 1994. Unfortunately only few of them have clauses specially regarding the Mediterranean. The international documents signed by Russia with the countries of the North-Africa provide also a good possibility for developing bilateral efforts.

Why “the Mediterranean elements” of these treaties and agreements do not work can be explained by different reasons: the quick changing of political situation, the lack of farsightedness of some governments, including those of Russia, the inertness of national bureaucracies etc. Nevertheless it must be noticed that, it seems, Russia has some positive results in its Mediterranean - Black Sea bilateral foreign policy activity.

The relations with Greece seem to be promising and this country is considered by a big part of Russian public opinion as the most possible preferential long-term partner in the area. The realization of the project for construction of the oil transfer system Novorossiisk-Burgas-Alexandropol is of big importance for all sides. In June 1997 the Greek Olympic Airways launched the new line: Athens - Moscow - Athens. But it seems that the economic cooperation could be much more effective.

Until recently public opinion was impressed by Turkey’s initiatives aimed at promoting various ties with Russia. Turkey is very active on the Russian market and is a good economic partner. However, from a certain point in the past the public opinion is concerned about Pan-Turkic propaganda and a tightening of the regime of the Black Sea Straits.

Effective for resolving regional problems can be the common efforts of several or many countries.

A special attention Russia pays to the OSCE, which is the only really all-European organization with 52 member-states. Admittedly, the potential of OSCE for peace and economic change in the Mediterranean has not been used to the full. The

root of the problem lies in the contradictions between various groups of member states of OSCE about the formulation and implementation of a policy of OSCE in the Mediterranean. Russia supports the growing feeling among the member states that this organization cannot remain inactive in the Mediterranean.

The constructive cooperation in the Mediterranean with the European Union could also be fruitful. This proposal was formulated as far back as long time ago by the Soviet Union. Russia is ready for such cooperation, and it is the turn of the EU. Probably, the EU, which has some technical assistance project for the Black Sea area could establish a special Black Sea Program for promoting regional development. These issues were discussed at the international conference "Europe and the Mediterranean" (Moscow, 14 November 1997) organized in cooperation with the EC.

It seems that really effective system of Mediterranean cooperation can be born by a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean - CSCM. The idea of calling such a conference, advanced officially by Italy and Spain several years ago, was supported by the majority of Mediterranean countries. It won approval at the CSCE's Palma de Mallorca meeting on the Mediterranean. Foreign Ministers of Western Mediterranean took a positive stand on it at their meetings. So did a number of West European countries having no direct access to the Mediterranean. The war in the Gulf and later in Balkans delayed the convocation of the CSCM but did not detract from relevance. It appears obvious that the participants of the CSCM would forge ahead with a discussion of the most essential political, economic, social and ecological issues. One of these categories should include the security problems of the Mediterranean. The idea of indivisibility of security, as well as the assertion that nobody should maintain its security at another expense and that the cause of tension and mistrust in the region should be removed through constructive and effective policies will apparently form the bases of the related decisions. It seems appropriate that the CSCM should reaffirm that every state, irrespective of its size or outlook, has the right to maintain its own security, that war and force should not be used as a means of achieving political goals and that new ways of maintaining security may provide for the safekeeping of life under peaceful conditions.

The matter of cooperation in economic, commercial, technological, scientific and environmental spheres would constitute another major theme for CSCM action. The issues of economic cooperation are close with those of cooperation in the social sphere. The priority must be given to problems connected with the migration.

The Black Sea Economic Cooperation - the BSEC can be considered as a good example of the regional partnership, which helps the shaping of a new European architecture. One can say that the cooperation became just reality in this part of the Mediterranean and Black Sea Region. Eleven Heads of States or Governments, who came in Moscow in October 1996 for their summit, discussed important problems of this area.¹³ They reiterated the intention of making the Black Sea Region a zone of peace, stability and economic prosperity and thereby to make contribution to the building of new Europe based on the known principles including equal security.

Some provisions of their Moscow Declaration are directly linked with the Mediterranean. They noted the positive steps in the Balkans and expressed readiness to cooperate constructively, relying also on the BSEC structures, in the implementation of economic projects in the Balkans.

The members of the Moscow Summit noticed the ties and confirmed the need to develop efficient cooperation between the countries of the Black Sea and Mediterranean and to establish the appropriate mechanism of interaction. They appreciated the Euro-Mediterranean initiative of the EU and expressed the intention to cooperate with this institution.

“Russia highly appraises the role of the BSEC” - Boris Yeltsin mentioned in the Address to the participants of the Summit. The BSEC countries account for 16 plus percent of Russian foreign trade. In security sphere of the BSEC Russia stands especially for effective measures against political terrorism, organized crime, belligerent nationalism, drug trafficking. Appearance of the prerequisites for

¹³ “Meeting of The Heads of State or Government of The Participating States of The Black Sea Economic Cooperation and The eighth Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of The BSEC Participating States. Moscow, 25 October 1996”. Istanbul 1996, 162 p.

establishing the free trade zone and harmonization of the foreign trade is a good evidence of effectiveness of this regional organization.¹⁴

The Government of Russian Federation adopted The Decision N 500 on further participation in the BSEC.¹⁵

Finally some conclusions can be formulated:

- Russia, as a big power with enormous and developing potential, needs to be present in the Mediterranean - Black Sea - Middle East region. This is evident from all points of view. Given that the Russian foreign policy regarding this area is linked with a lot of internal factors, it become a significant factor of home political and economic-financial life. Thus the future of the country, its democratization and development of the market economy depend to a considerable degree on the role, which Russia can play in this region and on the realization here of Russian natural interests. Besides the actual Russian activity here is a laboratory of regional foreign policy, which now become a very important element of the global system of international relations.

- The implementation of this line may be accomplished only through peaceful measures, i.e. through application of principles of cooperation and partnership, which are of priority for the practice of Russian foreign policy, as it was officially proclaimed.

- To make these cooperation and partnership really constructive and corresponding to the interests of all sides depends not only on Russia but also on all other subjects of the regional and international community.

¹⁴ "Nezavisimaj Gazeta" 11 December 1997

¹⁵ "Rossijskaj Gazeta" 21 May 1997