

Analysis

The Future of the Sevastopol Russian Navy Base

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Abstract

The recent election of Victor Yanukovich as president of Ukraine has brought the future status of Russia's naval base in Sevastopol back to the forefront of Russian-Ukrainian bilateral relations. When Victor Yushchenko was president, it was clear that the Ukrainian government would firmly oppose any possibility for extending the basing agreement. While many Russian analysts believe that the election of Yanukovich means that the likelihood that the lease will be renewed is substantially higher, the calculus is potentially more complicated, with constitutional, political and economic issues all standing in the way of a renewal.

The Recent History of the Sevastopol Basing Issue

The current agreement on the status of the Russian Fleet's Sevastopol Navy base was signed in May 1997. According to the agreement, the Soviet Black Sea Fleet (BSF) was initially divided evenly between Russia and Ukraine. Ukraine subsequently transferred most of its portion of the fleet back to Russia. In the end, Russia received 82 percent of the former Soviet Black Sea Fleet's assets. The agreement recognized Ukraine's sovereignty over Sevastopol and its harbor facilities, but allowed Russia to lease the bulk of the fleet's Sevastopol facilities for 20 years for a payment of \$97.75 million per year. Russia also retained criminal jurisdiction over its troops in the city.

The agreement expires in 2017, though there is a clause stating that it will be automatically renewed for a further five years unless one of the parties gives one year's advance notice in writing that it wishes to terminate the accord in 2017. While the official position of the Ukrainian government has always been that the agreement would not be renewed, the political tension caused by the summer 2008 war in Georgia brought this issue to the fore. Ukrainian politicians stated that the Russian Navy should begin preparations for withdrawal from the base and provided the Russian government with a memorandum on the timing and steps necessary to withdraw the fleet in a timely manner. The official Russian position is that the Russian Navy would like to negotiate an extension of the lease, but is planning for the possibility that it will be forced to leave Sevastopol at the end of the agreement. The Russian government has stated that it will not consider withdrawal plans prior to the agreement's expiration.

Recently, some nationalistically-minded politicians and retired admirals have made statements indicating that Russia has no intention of ever leaving the Sevastopol base. For example, former Black Sea Fleet

commander Admiral Igor Kasatonov at one point stated that 2017 is a significant date only for "Russophobic" politicians. "The Black Sea Fleet is in Sevastopol forever... It will retain its base in Sevastopol, another will be built in Novorossiisk, Tuapse, maybe also in Sukhumi, if there is a need." More recently, Mikhail Nenashev, a Russian State Duma deputy who serves on the Duma's Committee on Defense and also heads the Russian movement to support the navy, argued that Moscow plans to continue to develop the Black Sea Fleet's infrastructure, both in Russia and in the Crimea.

The Impact of Recent Political Developments

While President Yanukovich certainly has a more pragmatic attitude toward Russia than his predecessor, this does not necessarily mean that he will be eager to extend Russia's lease on its naval base. It is after all a very controversial political issue in Ukraine and he may not want to take any actions that exacerbate existing regional and ideological divisions. One poll, conducted last fall, indicates that only 17 percent of Ukrainians support an extension, while 22 percent want the Russian navy out even before the agreement expires in 2017. For a president who is seen by a large part of the population as excessively pro-Russian and who was elected with less than fifty percent of the total vote, going against public opinion on this issue may prove tricky.

Second, there is the constitutional issue. The Ukrainian constitution prohibits the placement of foreign military bases on Ukrainian territory. The current Russian navy base is permitted because of a separate article that allows for the temporary placement of foreign bases as part of a transition period that was designed to smooth the process of Ukraine solidifying its independence in the mid-1990s. As one of his last acts, President Yushchenko asked the Ukrainian Constitutional Court to rule on the contradiction be-

tween these articles. Regardless of the impact of any future court ruling based on this request, there is widespread consensus in Ukraine that the renewal of the basing agreement would require a constitutional amendment, which would in turn require a two-thirds vote in the Ukrainian parliament.

Finally, there are economic issues. The initial signals given by Yanukovich in his first weeks in office indicate that he is willing to discuss the future status of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, but only in the context of a wide-ranging negotiation that includes a whole set of issues. Without doubt, he will ask for a significant increase in the amount paid by Russia to lease the base – Russian sources believe that the absolute minimum that Ukraine would agree to is \$1 billion per year (i.e. a ten-fold increase), while the Ukrainian side may ask for as much as \$5-10 billion per year. In addition, Yanukovich is likely to seek additional Russian investments in regional infrastructure. He may also tie other issues, such as an agreement on border delimitation and even favorable terms on natural gas transit and import pricing, to a positive outcome on the basing issue. On the other hand, the departure of the Russian fleet is likely to lead to significant economic dislocation in Sevastopol, where it is one of the largest employers. This may in turn lead to social protests and even anti-government political agitation among the mostly pro-Russian population. Thus, even if the basing agreement is eventually renewed, it will not be an easy process and is likely to result in significant tension with Russia.

Alternative Basing Options

Given the relatively poor relations between Russia and Ukraine during the Yushchenko presidency, it is not surprising that in the last few years Russian naval officials and military analysts began to discuss possible alternatives for basing the Black Sea Fleet. One obvious alternative is the existing naval base at Novorossiisk, which has been expanded over the last several years and currently hosts a variety of smaller ships, including the fleet's two missile hovercraft, some small anti-submarine warfare ships, and the fleet's newer minesweepers. The commander of the BSF argues that while it would be theoretically possible to expand this base to house all the BSF ships, the reality is that doing so would have a negative economic impact on the region by creating bottlenecks at Novorossiisk's busy commercial port. The resulting delays could lead commercial shippers to increase their use of Ukrainian ports at Russia's expense. Russian commanders also contend that the base is unsuitable because of climate conditions in the

area. An additional base at Temriuk will only be useful for smaller ships and has the disadvantage of being located on the Azov Sea, making it easy in the event of hostilities for enemy navies to trap ships there by blockading the Kerch Strait.

Some analysts propose building an additional base near Novorossiisk, either to the northwest on the Taman peninsula or to the southeast at Tuapse or Gelendzhik. These would both be possible locations, though the expense of building a new naval base from scratch would be quite significant, especially if it becomes necessary to buy out tourist infrastructure along the coast. Another, even less likely, possibility is to establish a second base at a foreign location. Two such locations have been proposed: Ochamchira in Abkhazia and Tartus in Syria.

In the aftermath of the Georgia War, Sergei Bagapsh, the President of Abkhazia, offered to have Russian ships based at Ochamchira. While this offer was initially taken up as a serious possibility by the Russian media, subsequent discussions led Bagapsh to issue a clarification in which he said that Abkhazia will not become a permanent base for the Black Sea Fleet, though facilities could be developed to host BSF ships when necessary to counter potential Georgian attacks. In any case, the harbor at Ochamchira is too small to host more than a few Russian ships. For this reason, the basing agreement signed last month between Abkhaz President Bagapsh and Russian President Medvedev will provide the Russian Navy with the opportunity to temporarily base some ships in Abkhazia. At least two patrol craft belonging to the maritime border guard will be permanently based at Ochamchira, but there will not be a permanent Russian naval presence there for the foreseeable future. At the same time, it is possible that the Russian Navy will at least temporarily base its missile ships there after 2017 if forced to relocate from Sevastopol while an alternative base is prepared. This would free up pier space for the larger ships in Novorossiisk.

Even before the Georgia War, the Russian government announced that it was cleaning and upgrading its existing base in Tartus, Syria. This base served as a refueling and repair station for the Soviet Navy's Mediterranean squadron, but has been largely vacant since 1991. It has facilities to house several large ships. Speculation about the relocation of all or part of the Black Sea Fleet to Tartus in 2017 arose in conjunction with the Syrian President's visit to Moscow in mid-August 2008. Bashar Assad's strong support for Russian actions in the Georgia War and offer to further develop the Russian-Syrian military partnership led to speculation that a number of Black Sea Fleet ships could be re-

located to Tartus. Efforts to expand Russia's naval presence in Syria continue, as made clear in a recent semi-official review of Russian military policy toward the region, which indicated that the potential closure of the Sevastopol base was one of the factors that obligated Russia to further develop the base at Tartus.¹ However, the base currently only has three piers, which would be insufficient for more than a small part of the Black Sea Fleet. Any expansion would face large construction costs plus the likelihood of high fees for the lease of additional land. It is far more likely that Tartus will resume its role as a maintenance and supply base for the Russian Navy, especially given government promises to expand the Navy's presence in the Mediterranean and perhaps even to reestablish the Mediterranean squadron.

Prospects for the Future

Russian leaders are not willing to openly discuss the likelihood of the fleet's departure with considerable time remaining on the existing deal since they believe that in time they can reach agreement with Ukrainian leaders on a renewal. At the same time, for Yanukovich there is little political benefit, and potentially a high cost, to compromising. Given that seven years still remain on the lease, while President Yanukovich's current term will end in five years, it seems likely that little progress on resolving the basing issue will be made before 2015.

By that time, the Black Sea Fleet's situation could be very different. Most Russian navy specialists believe that the fleet will have few seaworthy ships left by then. The deputy mayor of Sevastopol recently noted that the Russian and Ukrainian Black Sea Fleets combined currently have less than 50 combat ships, compared to over 1,000 in Soviet times.² By 2017, most of the remaining ships will have exceeded the lifespan of their engines by a factor of three or four. As one Russian expert indicated, Russia does not currently have the capacity to rebuild the fleet by 2017 given the state of its shipbuilding industry. In this light, there may not be any need to build a new base in Novorossiisk or anywhere else, as the current facilities there will be more than sufficient to house the remaining seaworthy ships. Accordingly, the most important goal for the Russian Navy is to restore its domestic shipbuilding industry, a step that it is now starting to take by contemplating building French-designed ships under license in St. Petersburg.

For Ukraine, the most important goal is to design and enact a program for the economic development of the Crimea in general and Sevastopol in particular. The Russian Navy's eventual departure will leave a giant hole in the region's economy. Ukrainian politicians would be well served to be prepared to fill this hole before it leads to social unrest among the largely pro-Russian population of the region.

About the Author

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Recommended Reading

- Alexander Cooley and Volodymyr Dubovyk, "Will Sevastopol Survive: The Triangular Politics of Russia's Naval Base in Crimea," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo #47, December 2008.
- A.Iu Maruev and A.O. Karpenko, "Voenno-politicheskie aspekty formirovaniia interesov Rossii na iuzhnom geopoliticheskom vektore [Military-political aspects in forming Russia's interests in the southern geopolitical vector]," *Voennaia mysl*, November 2009.
- Aleksei Smirnov, "Esli chernomorskii flot Rossii ostanetsia v krymu [If Russia's Black Sea Fleet will stay in Crimea]," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 9 October 2009.
- A. Kletskov, "Osnovnye aspekty voenno-morskoï deiatelnosti Rossii v sredizemnom i chernom moriakh na sovremennom etape [Main aspects of Russian naval activity in the Mediterranean and Black Seas at the present time]," *Morskoï Sbornik*, May 2008.

1 The other factors included its potential to support anti-piracy operations in the Horn of Africa and the political need for an enhanced Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean.

2 This seems an obvious exaggeration, as the total number of combat ships in the Soviet Navy at its peak in the mid-1980s was 2500, and the Black Sea Fleet was the third largest of four fleets. Nevertheless, the total number of combat ships has declined by approximately a factor of ten.